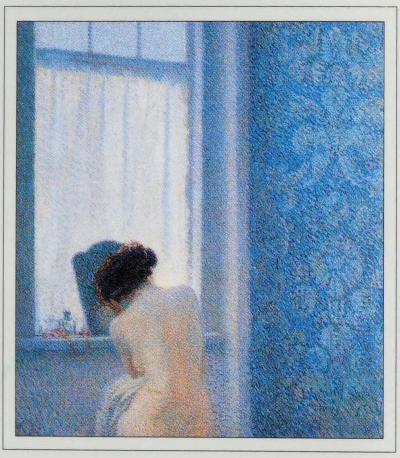
A Novel

ALBERTO MORAVIA



The Time of Indifference

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A NEW TRANSLATION BY TAMI CALLIOPE

In 1929, Alberto Moravia was twenty-one years old and the Fascists had been in control of Italy's government for five years. That same year, the Italian literary world was stunned by the appearance of Moravia's first novel, *The Time of Indifference,* a book that would make him famous, and would launch the career of one of the past century's most important men of letters.

Set in Rome, *The Time of Indifference* tells a deceptively simple story. Five characters are cast loose on the sea of modern life—obsessed with what they want, what they feel they are owed, the wrongs that have been done them, their loneliness. The intrigues of these family members and lovers serve to expose the hollow core of bourgeois society in the early twentieth century, and what Moravia destroys forever in this pitiless novel is the illusion that a world of ever-growing material comfort can ever feed the human soul.

ALBERTO MORAVIA began *The Time of Indifference* when he was eighteen and confined to bed with a long illness. Author of more than twenty books, he was married to the well-known Italian writers Elsa Morante and Dacia Maraini. He died in 1990.

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TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN BY TAMI CALLIOPE

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I

CARLA CAME IN. She was wearing a little brown dress of light wool; its skirt was so short that when she turned to shut the door, it climbed a good hand's breadth above the loose folds of her stockings. Unaware of this, she advanced cautiously into the living room, slouching and insecure, glancing around apprehensively. Only one lamp was lit, and it illumined the knees of Leo, sitting on the couch; a gray darkness engulfed the rest of the room.

"Mamma's getting dressed," she said, approaching him. "She'll come down in a little while."

"We'll wait for her together," said the man, leaning forward. "Come here, Carla, sit down here."

But Carla refused his offer. Standing beside the little table with the lamp, her eyes turned toward the circle of light cast by the lampshade, in which the knickknacks and other objects, unlike their dead and tenuous companions scattered throughout the shadows of the room, were revealed in all their color and solidity, she was fingering the nodding head of a piece of Chinese porcelain: an overladen donkey on which, straddled between two

baskets, was a sort of rural Buddha, a fat peasant wearing a flowered kimono around his belly. The donkey's head moved up and down, and Carla, her eyes lowered, her cheeks illuminated, her lips shut tight, seemed completely absorbed in what she was doing.

"Are you staying for supper with us?" she asked at last, without raising her head.

"Certainly," replied Leo, lighting up a cigarette, "or didn't you want me to?"

Seated on the couch, leaning forward, he observed the girl with avid attention: legs with crooked calves, flat belly, a small valley of shadow between her large breasts, fragile shoulders and arms, and that great round head, so heavy above the slender neck.

"God, what a beautiful child," he said to himself once again. "What a beautiful child." The lust he had assuaged that afternoon was roused again; the blood mounted to his cheeks; he felt like screaming from the strength of his desire.

She gave another tap to the donkey's head. "Did you notice how nervous Mamma was at the tea parlor today? Everyone was staring at us."

"That's her business," said Leo; he reached out as if unaware of what he was doing and lifted the hem of her skirt.

"Did you know you have beautiful legs, Carla?" he said, looking up at her with a face made stupid by excitement, which he could not manage to cover up with a false smile of joviality; but Carla neither blushed nor answered, and with a brusque stroke she beat her skirt back down.

"Mamma's jealous over you," she said, looking at him, "and that's why she makes life impossible for all of us."

Leo made a gesture as if to say, "So what can I do about it?" and then sat back on the couch and crossed his legs. "Do what I do," he said coldly. "As soon as I see that the storm's about to break, I stop talking. . . . Then it passes and it's all over."

"All over for you," she said in a low voice, and it was as if the man's words had reawakened a blind and ancient anger in her, "for you . . . but for us . . . for me," she burst out, with trembling

lips and eyes dilated by rage, and striking her own breast with a pointed finger, "for me who lives with her nothing's all over. . . ." A moment of silence. "If you only knew," she continued, with that low voice in which resentment so marked her words that it lent them a strange accent, as if she were foreign, "how oppressive and miserable and petty all this is, and what sort of life we have to endure every day, every day. . . ."

From the shadows engulfing the other, lower half of the living room, a dead wave of rancor roused itself to move forward and slide across Carla's breast before vanishing, black, leaving no wake, so that she was left with wide, staring eyes, breathless, left speechless by this passage of hatred.

They looked at each other.

"Damn," thought Leo, somewhat astonished by such violence, "the thing is serious." He leaned forward and held out his cigarette case. "A cigarette?" he offered kindly. Carla accepted one, lit it, and took another step toward him, enveloped in a cloud of smoke.

"And so," he asked, looking her up and down, "you really can't take it anymore?" He watched as she nodded, a little embarrassed by the confidential tone the dialogue had assumed. "Well," he added, "you know what you do when you can't take it anymore? You change it."

"That's what I'll end up doing," she said, with a certain theatrical emphasis; but she felt that she was acting out a false and ridiculous role. Was this really the man to whom her upsurge of exasperation was bringing her, all unawares? She looked at him: neither better nor worse than the others; in fact, certainly better than some, but beyond that endowed with a kind of fate of his own, since he had waited ten years for her to develop and mature in order to seduce her now, that very evening, in that darkened room.

"Change it," he said to her again. "Come live with me."

She shook her head. "You're crazy. . . ."

"Come on!" Leo leaned forward, grabbing her by the skirt. "We'll kiss your mother good-bye, we'll tell her to go to hell.

You'll have everything you want, Carla. . . ." He was tugging on her skirt; he glanced in excitement from her frightened and hesitant face to the stretch of naked leg that could be glimpsed above her stocking. "Take her home," he thought, "take her, possess her. . . ." He could hardly breathe. "Everything you want . . . dresses, lots of dresses, trips . . . we'll take trips together. . . . It's a real shame that a beautiful child like you should be sacrificed this way . . . come live with me, Carla. . . ."

"But that's all impossible," she said, trying to free her skirt from those hands to no avail. "There's Mamma . . . and it's impossible."

"To hell with your mother," repeated Leo, this time grabbing her by the waist, "we'll tell her to go to hell, it's time that it's over. And you'll come stay with me, won't you? You'll come stay with me, your only true friend, the only one in the world who understands you and knows what you want."

He pressed her more closely to him despite her frightened gestures. "To be home with her, at my house," he thought, and these swift ideas were like flashes of lightning in the midst of the storm of his lust. "Then I'd make her see what she wants." He raised his eyes to her bewildered face and felt the desire to murmur some sweet nothing, just to reassure her: "Carla, my love . . ."

Once again she made a move as if to repulse him, but this time more weakly, overcome by a kind of resignation of will; why refuse Leo? Virtue would only thrust her back into the boredom, pettiness, and disgust that had become second nature; and it also seemed to her, because of some fatalistic taste for moral symmetries, that this almost familial affair was the only epilogue her life deserved. After all, it would be new, life and she herself would be new; she looked into the face of the man straining toward hers and thought, "Just to end it, ruin it all . . . ," and her head spun as if she were preparing to hurl herself headlong into the void.

But instead she pleaded, "Let go of me," and tried once again to free herself; she thought vaguely first of repudiating Leo, then of surrendering to him, she wasn't sure why — maybe to have time to consider all the risk she was running, maybe because of some last desire to flirt. She struggled in vain, and her low, anx-

ious, and discouraged voice kept repeating the hurried and useless plea, "Let's just stay good friends, all right, Leo? Good friends like we were before," but the lifted skirt revealed her legs; and there was, in her whole reluctant attitude, and in those movements she made to cover and defend herself, and in her protests against the freedoms the man was taking with her, a shame, a flush, a dishonor that no liberation would ever be able to wipe out again.

"Close, close friends," repeated Leo joyfully, twisting the skimpy woolen dress in his fist, "close, close friends, Carla. . . ." He was clenching his teeth, and all his senses were exalted in the proximity of that body he so desired. "I've got you at last," he thought, twisting back on the couch to make room for the girl. And he was just about to bend that head, right there, over the lamp, when a tinkling of the glass door at the other end of the darkened room warned him that someone was coming in.

It was Carla's mother. The transformation her presence exerted on Leo's behavior was astonishing; at once he straightened to lean against the back of the couch, crossed his legs, and looked at the girl with indifference; in fact, he pushed the fiction to the point of saying, in the important tone of someone concluding a discussion, "Believe me, Carla, there's nothing else to do."

Her mother approached them. She had not changed her dress, but she had combed her hair and was thickly powdered and made-up; as she walked toward them from the door with her uncertain gait, her immobile face, in the shadows, with its formless features and vivacious colors, seemed no more than a stupid and pathetic mask.

"Did I make you wait long?" she asked. "What were you talking about?"

Leo, with a wide gesture, pointed to Carla, who was standing very straight in the middle of the living room. "I was just telling your daughter that there's nothing else to do this evening except to stay home."

"Nothing else at all," said the mother in approval, seating herself in an armchair with haughty authority so that she was facing

her lover. "We've already been to the movies today and the theaters are all showing things we've already seen. I wouldn't mind going to see *Six Characters* by Pirandello's company . . . but frankly, how would we manage? It'll be crowded tonight."

"Well, let me assure you, you won't be missing anything," observed Leo.

"Oh, no, you shouldn't say that," she protested mildly. "Pirandello puts on some good things. . . . What was that play called that we saw not long ago? Wait . . . oh, yes, *The Mask and the Face.* I enjoyed it so much."

"Well, maybe," said Leo, adjusting himself on the couch, "but he always bores me to death." He stuck his thumbs into his vest pockets and gazed first at the mother and then at the daughter.

Standing behind her mother's armchair, the girl felt that heavy, inexpressive look as if it were a blow, shattering her glass trance into pieces; and then, for the first time, she realized how old, habitual, and painful the scene she looked at was: her mother and her lover sitting, facing each other, in a semblance of conversation; that shadow, that lamp, those stupid and motionless faces — and she herself, leaning amiably on the back of the chair to listen and talk. "Life never changes," she thought, "it doesn't want to change." She would have liked to scream; she lowered her hands and wrung them together against her belly, so hard that she made her wrists ache.

"We can stay at home," her mother went on, "all the more reason since we're busy every day of the week . . . tomorrow there's that tea dance for abandoned babies . . . the day after tomorrow there's the masked ball at the Grand Hotel . . . and the other days we've been invited here and there. By the way, Carla, today I saw Signora Ricci. She's aged so much . . . I observed her attentively . . . she has two deep wrinkles that start from her eyes and go down to her mouth, and her hair — well, you can't tell *what* color it is anymore . . . she's a horror!" She twisted her mouth and waved her hands in the air.

"That's not the real horror," said Carla, coming forward and sitting down next to the man; a slight, painful impatience stung

her; she foresaw that her mother, taking oblique and tortuous paths, would reach, as she always did, her little scene of jealousy over her lover. And although Carla didn't know when or how it would happen, she was as sure of it as she was that the sun would rise the next morning and be followed by the night; and this clairvoyance made her afraid: there was no remedy; it was all impervious to change and subject to a wretched and petty destiny.

"She gossipped to me for so long," continued her mother, "and she told me that they had sold their old car and bought a new one, a Fiat. . . . 'Do you know,' she says to me, 'that my husband has become Paglioni's right-hand man at the National Bank? Paglioni can't do without him, Paglioni's hinting that he'll probably make him his partner' — Paglioni here, Paglioni there . . . it's despicable!"

"Why is it despicable?" asked Leo, contemplating the woman through half-closed eyes. "What exactly is despicable in all this?"

"Don't you know," asked the mother, staring at him sharply as if to invite him to weigh her words well, "that Paglioni is the Ricci woman's lover?"

"Everyone knows that," said Leo, and his heavy-lidded eyes came torpidly to rest on Carla, who was feeling dreamy and resigned.

"And do you also know," insisted Mariagrazia, enunciating each syllable very clearly, "that before they met Paglioni the Riccis didn't have a cent? And now they have a car?"

Leo turned his head. "Oh, so that's what it's about!" he exclaimed. "What's the matter with that? Poor people . . . they're doing their best to get ahead."

It was as if he had lit a fuse that was ready to go off.

"So that's how it is," said the mother, widening her eyes in irony, "You stand up for a shameless woman, who's not even good-looking, a bunch of bones who's using her lover unscrupulously and having him pay for her cars and her clothes and still manages to find a way to advance her husband — and no one knows whether the husband is more of an imbecile or a user! So, these are your principles? Wonderful, really wonderful . . . then

there's nothing more to say . . . it's all very clear . . . evidently you're attracted to that kind of woman. . . ."

"Here it comes," thought Carla. A slight shiver of impatience ran through her limbs; she half-closed her eyes and turned her head so that it was outside of that light and that conversation, so that it was in shadow.

Leo laughed. "No, frankly those aren't the kind of women that appeal to me." He cast a swift, greedy glance at the girl there beside him: full breasts, glowing cheeks, youthful body. "Here's the kind of woman that appeals to me," he wished he could shout at his lover.

"You say that now," insisted the mother, "you say that now . . . but *chi disprezza compra*, one buys the goods one scorns. But when you're around one of them, for instance the other day at the Sidolis' house, you lavish compliments on them, you say all kinds of stupid things. . . . Come off it, I know you. And you know what you are? A liar."

"Here it comes," Carla repeated silently. That conversation could go on and on, but she had realized that their fixed and incorrigible life would not change, and she had had enough. She got up. "I'm going to put on a sweater, I'll be right back," and without turning around, for she could feel Leo's eyes glued to her back like two leeches, she left the room.

She met Michele in the hallway.

"Is Leo in there?" he asked her.

"He's in there," said Carla, looking at her brother.

"I've just come from Leo's administrator," the boy continued calmly. "I found out a whole bunch of interesting things . . . the first of which is that we're ruined."

"Meaning what?" asked the girl, dumbfounded.

"Meaning," explained Michele, "that we have to give up the house to Leo to pay for that mortgage and go off without a penny, go live somewhere else."

They stared at each other; a strained and squalid smile flickered over the boy's face.

"Why are you smiling?" she asked. "Does this seem to you like something to smile about?"

"Why am I smiling?" he repeated. "Because all of this is totally indifferent to me . . . actually, I'm almost glad about it."

"That's not true."

"Certainly it's true," he retorted, and without saying another word, leaving her there amazed and vaguely frightened, he went into the living room.

His mother and Leo were still arguing; Michele had just enough time to overhear a familiar *tu* transform into a formal *Lei* at his entrance, and he smiled in disgusted pity at their ridiculous pretension.

"I think it's time for supper," he said to his mother, without greeting or even looking at the man; but his cold behavior didn't disconcert Leo.

"Oh, look who's here," he shouted, with his usual joviality, "our own Michele . . . come here, Michele, it's been a long time since we've seen each other."

"Only two days," said the boy, staring at him pointedly and forcing himself to appear cold and vibrant although all he felt was indifference; he would have liked to add, "And the less we see of each other, the better," or something of the kind, but he was neither ready nor sincere enough to do it.

"And two days don't seem much to you?" exclaimed Leo. "You can do so many things in two days!" He leaned his broad, triumphant face into the light from the lamp and said, "Eh, eh, what a lovely suit you're wearing. . . . Who made it for you?"

It was a dark blue suit, beautifully cut but very worn, that Leo must have seen him wear at least a hundred times before; but, struck by this direct attack on his vanity, Michele instantly forgot all his plans to be hateful and cold. "Do you like it?" he asked, not bothering to hide a small smile of self-satisfaction. "It's an old suit . . . I've worn it a long time. Nino made it for me, you know?" And he turned around instinctively to show Leo the back, pulling aside its tails so that the jacket adhered to his body. He glimpsed his reflection in the Venetian mirror hung on the opposite wall; the cut was perfect, there was no doubt about it, but his own attitude seemed to him to be informed with a fixed and ridiculous

stupidity, like those well-dressed dummies exposed with the price tag on their breasts in storefront windows; a slight unease slid insidiously into his thoughts.

"Good, very good." Now Leo bent forward to feel the material, then sat back up. "He's bravo, our Michele," he said, slapping him on the arm, "always impeccable, he does nothing but amuse himself and has not a thought in his head."

From the tone of these words and the smile that accompanied them, Michele realized, too late, that he had been being slyly flattered while actually being teased. Where were the indignation and resentment he had hoped to feel in the presence of his enemy? Somewhere else, in the limbo of his intentions; hatefully embarrassed by his own vanity, he looked at his mother.

"It's a pity you weren't with us today," she said. "We saw a magnificent film."

"Ah, yes," said the boy; then, turning toward the man, he added in the dryest, most resonant voice he could muster, "I was with your administrator, Leo . . ."

But Leo interrupted him with a sharp gesture. "Not now. I understand . . . we'll talk about it later, after supper . . . everything in its own time."

"As you like," said the boy, with instinctive docility, and immediately he realized that he had just been dominated for the second time. "I should have said, 'right away,'" he thought, "that's what anyone else would have done: said 'right away' and quarreled and maybe even insulted him." He wanted to scream with rage; in the space of a few minutes Leo had known how to make him fall into both of these mean abysses. Meanwhile those two, his mother and her lover, had risen to their feet.

"I'm hungry," remarked Leo, buttoning up his jacket, "so hungry . . ." The woman laughed; Michele followed them mechanically. "But after supper," he thought, trying in vain to inject some bitterness into these almost distracted ideas of his, "it won't go so easy with you."

They stopped at the door. "After you," said Leo, and the mother went on ahead. The man and the boy stood close, face to

face, and looked at each other. "Go ahead, go ahead," insisted Leo with the utmost courtesy, placing one hand on Michele's shoulder. "We yield first place to the master of the house." And with a paternal gesture, with a smile so friendly as to feel like he was teasing, he gently pushed the boy forward.

"The master of the house," thought Michele, without the slightest shadow of anger, "that's a good one. The master of the house is *you*." But he said nothing; he walked forward into the hallway behind his mother.

2

UNDER THE THREE-BRANCHED chandelier, the white bulk of the table shone with three slender slivers of light; the plates, the carafes, the glasses — it was all exactly like a block of marble barely scratched by the stonecutters. There were some darker stains: the wine was red, the bread was brown, a green soup steamed up from the bottom of the bowls; but that blinding white abolished them, as it were, and shone immaculate between the four walls on which, in contrast, everything — furniture and paintings — was lost in a single black shadow. Already seated at her place, her dazed eyes fixed on the vapor rising from her bowl, Carla waited without impatience. Followed by Leo, her mother was the first of the three to come in; her face was turned back to him and she was declaring in an exalted, ironic voice, "One doesn't live to eat, one eats to live . . . but instead you do the exact opposite . . . lucky you."

"But no . . . no," said Leo, entering in his turn and touching the barely warm radiator with a hopeless gesture, purely out of curiosity, "you didn't get my meaning. . . . I was just saying that when you're doing something you shouldn't be thinking about

anything else. For example, when I'm working all I think about is my work . . . when I'm eating I don't think about anything but eating . . . and so on . . . that way, everything goes smoothly."

"And when you're stealing?" Michele, who was following him, would have liked to ask him; but he couldn't hate a man he envied in spite of himself. "He's right, actually," he said to himself as he walked to his seat, "I think too much."

"Lucky you," repeated his mother sarcastically. "For me, instead, everything goes badly." She sat down, assumed an expression of sorrowful dignity, and, with her eyes lowered, began to stir her soup with her spoon so that it would cool.

"And why does everything go badly?" asked Leo, sitting down in turn. "If I were in your place, I'd be happy: a lovely daughter . . . an intelligent son with great hopes for the future . . . a beautiful home . . . who could want for more?"

"Oh, you understand me all too well," said the mother with a half-sigh.

"No, I don't. At the risk of being thought ignorant, I must confess to you that I understand nothing." The soup was finished, and Leo put down his spoon. "Besides, you're all malcontents. . . . Don't think you're the only one, Signora. Shall we see? So — you, Carla, tell the truth, are you happy?"

The girl raised her eyes; this spirited and falsely good-natured joviality deepened her impatience. Here they were, here *she* was, sitting at the family table as on so many other evenings; here were the same old discussions, the same old things, stronger than time itself; and above all, the same old hopeless light, bereft of illusions, so particularly habit-worn, so thinned by use, like the material of an old dress, and so inseparable from their faces, that sometimes when she turned it on abruptly over the empty table she had the distinct impression of seeing their four faces — her mother's, her brother's, Leo's, and her own — suspended there, in that mean halo. Here were all the objects of her weary boredom; nonetheless, Leo must needs sting her right there, where all her spirit was sorest. However, she restrained herself: "In fact, things could be better," she admitted, and lowered her head once again.

"There!" cried Leo, triumphant, "I told you! Even Carla . . . but that's not all . . . Michele, as well, I'm sure of it. Isn't it true, Michele, that things are going badly for you, too?"

The boy, too, looked at him before responding. "All right," he thought, "now I need to answer him sharply, insult him, start up a good quarrel, and finally break off with him." But he felt no sincerity; only a mortal calm, irony, and indifference. "How about if you just shut up?" he said tranquilly. "You know better than I do how things are going."

"Ah, you sly devil!" cried Leo. "Cunning Michele . . . you want to avoid answering, you want to gloss over it, but it's clear that you're not happy, either, or you wouldn't be pulling a face as long as Lent." He served himself from the platter the maid was holding out to him, then said, "I, on the other hand, my dear people, am proud to declare that everything is going well for me, more than that, *very* well, and that I'm extremely happy and completely satisfied, and that if I had to be born again I wouldn't want to be reborn as anything but myself and with my own name: Leo Merumeci."

"Happy man!" exclaimed Michele ironically. "But at least tell us how you do it."

"How I do it?" he repeated, with his mouth full. "It's simple . . . but would you like to know instead," he added, pouring himself some wine, "why the three of you aren't like me?"

"Why?"

"Because," he said, "you get angry over things that aren't worth it." He stopped talking and drank; a moment of silence followed. All three — Michele, Carla, and their mother — felt offended in their self-regard. The boy saw himself as he was, miserable, indifferent, and disheartened, and said to himself, "Ah, I'd like to see you in my circumstances"; Carla thought about her life, which never changed, and about the man's designs on her, and yearned to shout out, "I have real reasons"; but it was their impulsive and garrulous mother who spoke for all three.

Because of the high concept she had of herself, having been lumped in together with her children in that general tendency

toward discontent had wounded her like a betrayal; her lover had not only abandoned her but was making fun of her, as well.

"All right," she said at last, breaking the silence, in the ironic, malevolent tone of someone determined to quarrel, "but I, *dear Leo*, have good reasons for not being happy."

"I don't doubt it," said Leo calmly.

"We don't doubt it," echoed Michele.

"I'm no longer a child like Carla," continued the mother in a resentful, emotional voice. "I'm a woman who's had experiences, who's had sorrows, oh, yes! so many sorrows," she repeated, excited by her own words, "who's gone through many hard times and many difficulties, and who nevertheless has always known how to keep her dignity intact and who has always known herself to be superior to everyone else, yes, dear Merumeci," she burst out bitterly, sarcastically, "to *everyone* else, including you. . . ."

"I never thought that . . ." began Leo; but now they all knew that the mother's jealousy had found a channel and would pursue it to the end; they all foresaw, with boredom and disgust, the petty storm that was gathering in that tranquil suppertime light.

"And you, dear Merumeci," continued Mariagrazia, staring at her lover with wild eyes, "spoke very slightingly a few minutes ago. . . . I'm not one of your elegant girlfriends without a scruple in their heads, who think of nothing but amusing themselves and getting ahead, today one lover, tomorrow another, just to get along in life . . . no, you deceive yourself . . . I feel myself to be very, I mean *very* different from those ladies. . . ."

"I never meant to insinuate that . . ."

"I am a woman," the mother went on with growing exaltation, "who could teach the art of living to you and so many others like you, but who has the uncommon delicacy, or stupidity, not to put herself first in line, not to talk about herself, and who therefore is almost always misunderstood and misinterpreted . . . but not for this," she said, raising her voice to its highest pitch, "not because I'm too good, too discreet, too generous, not for this, I repeat, do I have any less right than another woman to ask that I not be insulted at every moment by just anyone. . . ." She cast a last with-

ering glance at her lover and then lowered her eyes and started mechanically rearranging the objects in front of her.

The greatest consternation was visible on all their faces.

"But I never had the slightest intention of insulting you," said Leo mildly. "I was merely saying that among us all, I'm the only one who's not discontented."

"Well, of course," replied the mother, very allusively, "of course it's absolutely obvious that *you're* not discontented."

"Look, Mamma," Carla intervened, "he wasn't saying anything insulting." Now, after this last scene, a terrified desperation had taken hold of the girl. "To end it," she thought, looking at her childish, middle-aged mother, who had lowered her head and seemed to be ruminating on her jealousy, "just to be done with all this, make a change at any cost." Absurd resolutions ran through her mind: to go away, vanish, disappear into the world, dissolve in the air. She recalled Leo's intriguing words: "You need a man like me." It was the end — "Him or some other man," she thought — the end of her patience. Her eyes passed painfully from her mother's face to Leo's — these were the faces in her life, hard, plastic, uncomprehending — and then she lowered her gaze to the plate where her dinner was cooling in a coagulating skin of sauce.

"You," ordered her mother, "don't say a word. You can't understand."

"Eh, my dear lady," protested her lover, "I don't understand a thing, either."

"You," said her mother, accentuating every syllable and arching her eyebrows, "understand me all too well."

"Perhaps," began Leo, shrugging his shoulders.

"But be quiet, just be quiet, then," interrupted the woman scornfully. "It's better that you don't talk. . . . In your place I'd try to make people forget me, I'd try to disappear."

Silence. The maid came in and took away their plates.

"So," thought Michele, seeing the angry expression on his mother's face slowly but surely relax, "the storm has passed over, fair weather's on the way." He raised his head and said, without a shadow of gaiety, "Listen, is the incident closed?"

"Completely closed," replied Leo with certainty. "Your mother and I have made up." He turned toward Mariagrazia. "Isn't it true, Signora, that we've made up?"

A pathetic smile hovered on the woman's painted face; she recognized that voice and insinuating tone from better times, from when she had still been young and her lover had still been faithful. "Do you think, Merumeci," she inquired, gazing affectedly at her hands, "that it's so easy to forgive?"

The scene became sentimental; Carla shuddered and lowered her eyes; Michele smiled scornfully. "So," he thought, "we've gotten this far, hug each other and stop talking about it."

"To forgive," said Leo, gravely comical, "is the duty of every good Christian." ("To hell with her," he was thinking meanwhile, "luckily there's the daughter to compensate me for the mother.") He observed the girl imperceptibly, without turning his head: sensual, more so than her mother; full, red lips — certainly ready to surrender. After supper he'd have to try, strike while the iron was hot — the next day it might be too late.

"So," said the mother, completely reassured, "we're Christians and we forgive." The smile she had so far held back broadened, bright and pathetic, over two rows of teeth of a dubious whiteness; her whole flaccid body quivered. "And by the way," she added, with sudden maternal affection, "we musn't forget — tomorrow's our Carla's birthday."

"We don't do that anymore, Mamma," said the girl, raising her head.

"I say we'll celebrate it," replied her mother solemnly, "and you, Merumeci, must consider yourself already invited for tomorrow morning."

Leo made a kind of a bow over the table: "Much obliged." Then, turning to Carla, he asked, "How old will you be?"

They looked at each other. The mother, who was sitting across from her daughter, raised two fingers and composed her mouth as if saying "twenty." Carla saw, understood, hesitated; then a sudden hardness raked her heart. "She wants," she thought, "for me to say I'm younger than I am so that she won't seem so old

herself," and she rebelled. "Twenty-four," she replied without blushing.

An expression of disappointment washed over her mother's face.

"So old?" exclaimed Leo, in a tone of joking wonder.

Carla nodded. "So old," she repeated.

"But you shouldn't have told him," said her mother reprovingly; the bitter orange she was eating added to the acidity of her expression. "You're always the age that you look. . . . Now, you don't look a day over nineteen." She swallowed the last slice; the orange was finished. Leo brought out his cigarette case and offered it to everyone; the blue smoke rose in slender columns above the disordered table; for a moment they all sat without moving, looking into each other's eyes; then the mother got up.

"Let's go into the living room," she said; and one after another, all four of them walked away from the table and out.

3

A SHORT BUT AGONIZING JOURNEY across the hallway: Carla was looking down, thinking vaguely that their daily passage must have worn away the weft of the old carpet that hid the floor, and that even the oval mirrors hung on the walls must preserve the trace of their faces and figures, which had been reflected there countless times every day for so many years — oh, just for an instant, enough time for her mother and her to examine their makeup, and Michele the knot of his tie. In that hallway habit and boredom lay in ambush to pierce the soul of whomever passed through it as if the very walls had exhaled poisonous spirits. Everything was immutable: the carpet, the light, the mirrors, the glass-paned door of the entrance hall to the left, the dark vestibule of the stairs to the right — everything was a repetition: Michele, who stopped for a moment to light a cigarette and blow out the match; her mother, who was asking her lover in a complacent tone, "Don't you think my face looks tired tonight?"; Leo, who replied indifferently, without taking the cigarette out of his mouth, "No, on the contrary, I've never seen it so glowing"; and she herself, who was suffering from it all. Life didn't change.

They went into the cold, dark, rectangular parlor, which a kind of an arch divided into two unequal parts, and sat down in the corner opposite the door. Dark velvet curtains concealed the closed windows, and there was no overhead light, but only some candelabra-shaped lamps affixed to the walls at equal distances from each other. Three of these were lit and cast a dim, diffused light into the smaller half of the room. The other half, beyond the archway, remained in black shadow, in which the reflections of the mirrors and the long shape of the piano were barely discernable.

For a moment no one spoke. Leo smoked solemnly; the mother examined her hands with their polished nails in melancholy dignity; Carla, almost on all fours, was trying to light the lamp in the corner, and Michele was watching Leo. Then the lamp came on, Carla sat down, and Michele spoke: "I went to see Leo's administrator and he practically talked my ear off, he had so much to tell me. . . . And the crux of it is this: it seems that the mortgage is due a week from now, and that we'll have to move out and sell the house to pay Merumeci."

The mother widened her eyes. "That man doesn't know what he's talking about . . . he's making it all up in his own head . . . I always said he had something against us."

Silence. "That man told the truth," said Leo finally, without raising his eyes.

Everyone stared at him. "But look, Merumeci," pleaded the mother, joining her hands together, "you can't be saying you'll kick us out, just like that? Grant us an extension!"

"I've already granted two of them," said Leo. "That's enough. All the more since it wouldn't help to prevent the sale. . . ."

"What do you mean, not prevent it?" asked the mother.

Leo raised his eyes at last and looked at her. "I'll explain myself — unless you all manage to scrape together eight hundred thousand lire, I don't see how you can pay up without selling the house."

The mother understood, and a vast terror yawned open before her eyes like an abyss; she paled and looked at her lover. But Leo, completely absorbed in the contemplation of his cigar, did not reassure her.

"Does this mean," said Carla, "that we have to move out of the house and go live in an apartment with just a few rooms?"

"Right," replied Michele, "exactly."

Silence. The mother's fear grew enormous. She had never wanted to know anything about the poor, not even their names; she had never wanted to admit to the existence of people whose work was hard, whose lives were squalid. "They live better than we do," she had always said. "We're more sensitive and intelligent and so we suffer more than they do." And now, suddenly, she would be forced to mingle with them, to swell the throng of the miserable poor; and the same sense of repulsion, humiliation, and fear that she had experienced one day while riding in a low car through a lurid, menacing crowd of men on strike now returned to oppress her. She was terrified not so much of the hardships and privations she would have to endure as of the stinging shame, the thought of how they would treat her, of what her acquaintances — all rich, respected, and elegant people — would say. She could see herself, yes . . . poor, all alone, with her two children, without any friends, since they all would have abandoned her; without amusements, entertainments, dances, lights, parties, conversation — complete obscurity, naked obscurity.

She grew yet paler. "I have to speak with him alone, one on one," she thought, grasping at the idea of seducing him, "without Michele and without Carla. . . . Then he'd understand."

She looked at her lover. "You, Merumeci," she proposed vaguely, "need to grant us another extension, and we'll come up with the money somehow."

"How?" inquired the man, with an ironic half-smile.

"The banks . . . ," ventured Mariagrazia.

Leo laughed. "Oh, the banks." He leaned over and stared into his lover's face. "The banks," he said, emphasizing every syllable, "do not lend money unless they have secure guarantees, and now, with this shortage of money that's hit them, they don't lend it at all. But let's say that they *would*. . . . What kind of guarantee could you offer them, dear woman?"

"His argument is flawless," observed Michele. He wished he

could feel passionately about this matter, so vital to them all; he wished he could protest. "Let's see," he thought, "we're talking about our very existence . . . we could find ourselves from one minute to the next with barely the means to live." But no matter what efforts he made, their ruin failed to touch him; it was like watching someone drown, watching them and not moving a finger.

Not so his mother: "You grant us this extension," she said proudly, sitting extremely erect and enunciating her words very clearly, "and you can be sure that on the date the mortgage falls due you will have your money, without a doubt, right down to the last cent."

Leo laughed softly and lowered his head. "Yes, I'm sure of it . . . but then why do you need the extension? Whatever means you'll be using a year from now to get the money . . . why not use them now and pay me right away?"

His lowered face was so calm, so sagacious, it scared her. Her irresolute gaze wandered from Leo to Michele and then to Carla: there they were, her two helpless children, who would have to go through the hardship and trials of poverty; she was seized by an exalted maternal love. "Listen, Merumeci," she began, in a persuasive voice, "you're a friend of the family, I can tell you anything . . . it's not a matter of me, it's not for myself that I ask this extension, I'm ready right now to go live in a garret. . . ." She lifted her eyes to heaven and said, "God knows if I'm thinking of myself. . . . But I have to find a husband for Carla. . . . Now, you know the world . . . the same day I left the house and went to live in some tiny apartment, everyone would turn their back on her . . . that's the way people are. So will you kiss my daughter's marriage goodbye for me?"

"Your daughter," said Leo, falsely earnest, "has the kind of beauty that will always draw suitors."

He looked over at Carla and winked; but a profound, repressed anger possessed the girl. "Who do you think would marry me," she wanted to shout at her mother, "with this man in the house and you living this way?" She was offended and humiliated by the

ease with which her mother, who customarily paid her no attention at all, had brought her into all this to support her own purposes. She needed to end it; she would give herself to Leo, and after that no one would want her for a wife. She looked her mother in the eyes. "Don't give a thought to me, Mamma," she said firmly. "I don't have anything to do with all this and I don't *want* to have anything to do with it."

It was at that moment that a bitter laugh, false enough to set their teeth on edge, issued from the corner where Michele was sitting. His mother turned toward him. "Do you know," he said to her, straining to give his indifferent voice a sarcastic intonation, "who'll be the first one to abandon us if we move out of the house? Guess."

"Oh, I don't know."

"Leo," he burst out, pointing to the man. "Our own Leo."

Leo made a gesture of protest.

"Ah, Merumeci?" said Mariagrazia, unsure and upset, staring at her lover as if she wished to read in his face whether or not he was capable of such a betrayal. Then suddenly she said, her eyes and smile inflamed with a pathetic sarcasm, "Right, right . . . of course. How stupid of me not to have thought of it. . . . Of course, Carla," she added, turning to her daughter, "Michele's right. The first person who will pretend he never knew us — after he's pocketed our money, naturally — will be Merumeci. No, don't protest," she continued with an insulting smile. "It's not your fault, all men are like that . . . I could swear it, you'll pass by me with one of your oh-so-nice, oh-so-elegant ladyfriends and as soon as you see me . . . you'll turn your head to the other side . . . of course . . . *dear Leo* . . . I'm so sure of it I'd stick my hand in the fire." She was silent a moment. "Well, well," she concluded, in bitterness and resignation, "even Christ was betrayed by his closest friends."

Overwhelmed by that flood of accusations, Leo set down his cigar. "You," he said, turning to Michele, "are just a kid, which is why I'm not even taking you into consideration. But that you, Signora," he added, turning toward the mother, "should believe that

for any sort of sale I would abandon my closest friends, well, I really didn't expect that . . . no, I really didn't expect it." He shook his head and picked up his cigar.

"How phony he is," thought Michele, amused; then he remembered abruptly that he, himself, was the man who had been affronted, made fun of, and robbed — of his family estate, of his dignity, and through his own mother. "Insult him," he thought, "provoke an all-out scene." He understood that he had let a thousand more favorable occasions for quarreling go by that evening already — when Leo had refused to grant them an extension, for instance. But by now it was too late. "You didn't expect it, eh?" he said, turning around in the armchair and crossing his legs. He hesitated, then said without moving, "You bastard."

Everyone turned, his mother in surprise, the man slowly, taking the cigar from his mouth. "What did you say?"

"What I mean is," explained Michele, gripping the arms of the chair with his hands and finding nowhere in his indifference the impulse that had pushed him to such a vehement insult, "that Leo . . . has ruined us . . . and now he's pretending to be our friend . . . but he's not."

Silence; disapproval. "Listen, Michele," said Leo, fixing two entirely inexpressive eyes on the boy, "it's been obvious for some time that you want to pick a quarrel with me tonight, I don't know why. . . . I'm sorry, but I'm telling you right now: don't do it. If you were a man I'd know how to answer you. But you're an irresponsible kid . . . so the best thing you can do is go to bed and sleep on it." He picked his cigar back up in silence, then added abruptly, "And you say this to me just when I was about to propose some more favorable conditions."

Silence. "Merumeci is right," said the mother, in turn. "Really, Michele, he hasn't ruined us and he's always been our friend. Why should you insult him this way?"

"Ah, now she's defending him," thought the boy, and he was invaded by a harsh disgust for himself and the others. "If you all only knew how indifferent I am to all this!" he wanted to scream at them. His mother, interested and excited; Leo, playing them

false; even Carla, who was staring at him in astonishment — all seemed at that moment to be ridiculous but enviable, precisely because they clung to their own view of things. They truly considered the word "bastard" to be an insult, while for him words, gestures, sentiments, everything was an empty game of sham illusions.

However, he wanted to get to the end of the road he had taken. "What I said was the simple truth," he said without conviction.

Leo shrugged in disgust and displeasure. "Would you do me a favor," he interrupted, shaking the ash violently from his cigar, "would you do me a goddamn favor . . ." and already his mother was about to back up her lover, with a "you're dead wrong, Michele," when down at the other end of the room, in what little light illumined it from their corner, the door opened halfway and the blond head of a woman appeared.

"May I?" asked the head; everyone turned around; "Oh, Lisa!" exclaimed the mother, "Come in, do come in!"

The door opened all the way and Lisa came in. A dark blue coat enveloped her fat body, falling almost all the way to her minuscule feet; her head, with its little blue and silver top hat, appeared even smaller above her full shoulders, which the overcoat made even rounder. Although the coat was cut full, her bursting breasts and hips showed through it clearly, as an abundance of curved and swollen lines. In contrast, the extremities of this body were incredibly tiny, and under the wide bell of her cloak one could glimpse the surprising slenderness of her ankles.

"I'm not disturbing you?" asked Lisa as she walked toward them. "It's late . . . I know . . . but I had supper nearby and since I was passing your street I couldn't resist the temptation to pay you a visit, and so here I am. . . ."

"Disturbing us? Really!" said the mother, as she rose to greet her friend. "Won't you take off your coat?"

"No," answered the other woman, "I'm only staying for a moment, then I'll be off. Here, I'll just open it . . . so as not to get too hot."

She untied the belt, revealing a flashy, shining dress of black

silk decorated with large, bluish flowers, and greeted Carla. "Hello, Carla . . . Leo, ah, Merumeci's here, too . . . impossible not to find him here . . . Michele, how's Michele doing?" and she sat down on the sofa next to Mariagrazia.

"What a beautiful dress you have on," said the mother, opening up her friend's coat. "So, what can you tell me, what's new?"

"Nothing," answered Lisa, looking around, "but . . . ," she went on, "you all look agitated — have I broken into the middle of some quarrel?"

"Not at all," Leo protested, directing a serene gaze at Lisa through the smoke of his cigar, "not at all. The greatest gaiety has reigned until now."

"We were just chatting about this and that . . . that's all," said the mother; she picked up a cigarette box and offered it to her friend. "Will you smoke?"

At this point Michele, with his usual bad timing, interrupted to say, "It's the absolute truth." He leaned forward, looking at Lisa attentively. "We were squabbling and you interrupted our quarrel."

"Oh," said Lisa, with a strained, malicious laugh but without getting up, "then I'll be going. . . . Not for all the gold in the world would I want to disturb a family conference."

"Don't even dream of it," protested the mother; she twisted her face at Michele in disapproval and said, "Silly!"

"Me, silly?" repeated the boy. "It serves me right," he thought. "Silly . . . yes, silly to want to force myself to feel passionately about these things that concern you." A horrible sense of futility and boredom oppressed him; he let his gaze wander through the hostile shadows of the parlor, then over those faces. Leo was looking at him ironically, he thought; an almost imperceptible smile was brushing his fleshy lips, and that smile was insulting. A strong man, a normal man, would take offense and call him on it, but not him . . . he, with a certain depressing sense of superiority and of compassionate contempt, remained indifferent. But once again he wanted to fight his own sincerity. "Protest," he thought, "insult him again."

He looked at Leo. "Tell me," he profferred in a colorless voice, "what exactly is there to smile about?"

"Me? Word of honor . . . ," began Leo, pretending the greatest surprise.

"I say," Michele continued, raising his voice with a painful effort (this was how one must quarrel; he remembered witnessing an argument in a streetcar between two equally fat and important gentlemen, and each of them, after having called on the people around them as witnesses and declared in resentful tones their own individual honor, profession, wounds sustained in the war, and, in general, anything else that might have the power to move their audience, had ended up trying to overcome his adversary by simply shouting, thus arriving at a certain degree of sincerely felt anger; and he must do the same), "don't imagine that just because Lisa's here I'm not capable of repeating what I said earlier. . . . In fact, I *will* repeat it . . . you bastard!"

Everyone stared at him. "For heaven's sake!" exploded his mother, indignant.

Lisa observed Michele with curiosity. "Why? What's happened?" she asked.

Leo, on the other hand, neither moved nor showed any sign that he had been offended, except by giving voice to a high, false, scornful laugh. Then, "Ah, wonderful, this is just wonderful," he repeated, "now we can't even smile around here. A joke is a joke," he added more brusquely, rising from the depths of the armchair and bringing his fist down on the table, "but enough is enough. . . . Michele, either you apologize to me or I'm walking out."

Everyone understood that the thing had become serious, and that that laugh had been nothing more than the livid flash before the lightning bolt cracks and explodes.

"Merumeci is absolutely right," said the mother, her face hard and her voice imperious; she was feeling a cruel irritation with her son, since she was afraid that her lover would take advantage of the situation to break off their relationship. "Your behavior is disgusting. I order you to apologize."

"But . . . I don't understand . . . why is Merumeci a bastard?"

asked Lisa, with the evident desire of complicating things.

Only Carla neither moved nor spoke. A wretched, nagging disgust was oppressing her; she had the impression that the agonizing tide of the small events of that day was about to overflow and submerge her patience; she half-closed her eyes and spied on the stupid, irritated faces of the other four impatiently between her lashes.

"Oh, oh," said Michele ironically, without moving, "you order me? And if I don't obey?"

"Then," replied Mariagrazia, not without a certain pathetic and theatrical dignity, "you would hurt your mother's feelings."

He stared at her for a moment without speaking. "You would hurt your mother's feelings," he repeated to himself, and the phrase seemed to him at once ridiculous and profound. "Here we are," he thought, with superficial disgust, "talking about Leo . . . her lover . . . and yet she doesn't hesitate to bring her *motherhood* into it." But that was the phrase she had used: "you would hurt your mother's feelings"; it was repugnant and irrefutable. He looked away from that sentimental face and suddenly forgot all his efforts toward sincerity and anger. "The bottom line is," he thought, "that I'm indifferent to it all. Why not apologize and save her from these famous hurt feelings?" He lifted up his head; but he wanted to tell the truth, to demonstrate his own insulting indifference. "Do you all think," he began, "that I'm not capable of apologizing to Leo? If you only knew how little I care about any of this."

"Well, that's a nice thing to say," interrupted his mother.

"How little any of this matters to me," continued Michele, growing exalted, "is beyond your imaginations. So don't worry, Mamma . . . if you want, I won't simply apologize to Leo, I'll even kiss his feet."

"No, don't apologize." Lisa, who had been following the scene with the greatest attention, broke in at this point. Everyone stared at her.

"Thank you so much, Lisa," said the mother, theatrical and offended, "thank you so very much for setting my own son against me."

"Who's setting your son against you?" replied Lisa calmly. "But it seems to me it's not worth the effort. . . ."

Leo gave her a nasty look. "I don't like being called names by a kid," he said in a hard voice. "I've asked for an apology and I'll have it."

"Wouldn't it be better to forget everything and make up?" asked Carla, thrusting her half-stunned, half-ingenuous face forward.

"No," answered her mother, "Merumeci is right. Michele needs to apologize."

Michele stood up. "All right, don't worry, I will. . . . So, Leo," he said, turning toward the man, "I apologize deeply for having insulted you." He stopped for an instant; how easily the humiliating words had come out of his mouth! "And I promise I won't do it again," he concluded, in the tranquil and indifferent voice of a child of six.

"All right, all right," said Leo, without looking at him.

"Imbecile!" Michele would have liked to yell at him, seeing him so sure of himself, so thoroughly immersed in his role; but his mother took precedence, she was so happy in her illusion. "Michele is a good son," she said, gazing at the boy with sudden tenderness. "Michele obeyed his mother."

The flame of humiliation and shame that had not burned Michele's cheeks as he apologized to Leo suddenly scorched him, faced with this incomprehension. "I did what you wanted," he said roughly, "and now with your permission I'll go to bed because I'm very tired." He turned on his heel like a marionette and went out into the hallway without saying goodnight to anyone.

But the moment he reached the vestibule, he realized that someone had run up behind him; he turned around; it was Lisa. "I came here on purpose," she said breathlessly, giving him a curious, impassioned look, "to tell you that I can introduce you to that relative of mine anytime you want . . . and he'll be able to find you something to do . . . in his firm or somewhere else."

"Thanks very much," said Michele, staring at her in turn.

"But you need to come to my house. . . . You can meet each other there."

"All right." The more embarrassed Lisa became, the calmer and more attentive the boy seemed to be. "When?"

"Tomorrow," said Lisa. "Come over tomorrow morning, come early. He'll arrive around noon . . . but it doesn't matter . . . we can talk for a while, all right?" They both fell silent, looking at each other. "Why did you apologize to Leo?" the woman suddenly dared to ask. "You shouldn't have done it."

"Why not?" he inquired. "Ah, this is it," he thought, "this is what she was coming around to."

"It's too long a story to go into now . . . and in there they might think . . ." explained Lisa, becoming very mysterious, "but if you come over tomorrow I'll tell you about it."

"All right, then, till tomorrow." He shook her hand and went off up the stairs.

Lisa walked back into the parlor. The three of them were sitting there in the corner around the lamp; the mother, all her bright colors exposed to the light, was talking about Michele. "It's obvious," she was explaining to her lover, who was lolling back in the armchair, listening to her and scowling, without batting a lash, "that it cost him a lot to make those apologies. . . . He's not the kind that bends easily. . . . He's proud," she added as if in challenge, "he has a straight, proud spirit like mine."

"I don't doubt it," said Leo, raising his lids to cast a long look toward Carla, "but this time he did well to bend."

All three fell silent; the incident was exhausted. And stepping soundlessly toward them, as if she were the least-concerned person in the world, Lisa approached them and asked, "Do you have your car, Merumeci?"

All three of them turned. "My car," repeated the man, shrugging, "sure, I have the car."

"Then you can drive me home," said Lisa. "That is, if it's no bother."

"Of course not, the pleasure is all mine." Leo rose and buttoned his jacket. "We'll need to get going, then," he began. Inwardly, he was seething; not only hadn't he managed to get anywhere with Carla, but now, look, he even had to drive Lisa home.

But the mother's dim-witted jealousy saved him. Many years earlier Leo and Lisa had been lovers; even more, they were going to be married. Then Mariagrazia had come along, already widowed, and had stolen her best friend's husband-to-be. It was an ancient story, but . . . what if those two were thinking about starting back up? She turned to Lisa. "No, don't go right away," she said, "I have to talk to you."

"All right," replied Lisa, looking at her and pretending embarrassment, "but then I won't have Merumeci anymore to drive me back home."

"Oh, don't worry yourself about that," said Leo, and this time the pleasure really was his. "I can wait for you in the hallway or here. . . . Go ahead and talk with the Signora. . . . I'll wait for you. Carla," he added, glancing at the girl, "will keep me company."

Carla got up lazily and approached him, shaking her great head. "This is it," she was thinking, "if I go with him now, it's all over." It seemed to her that Leo was looking at her mischievously, and this anticipatory complicity was hateful to her; but what was the use in resisting? A painful impatience possessed her: "To be done with it," she thought over and over, looking around that dark parlor where so many fiery days had burned into ashes, and at the solemn, ridiculous group they made around the lamp: "to be done with all this," and she felt herself fall into ambivalent abandon like a feather down a stairwell.

So she didn't protest, she didn't speak.

"But you don't know," objected her mother, "how long I'll keep Lisa. . . . Go, go on, we'll call a taxi for Lisa." Insinuating voice, jealous voice.

Leo was polite but inflexible: "I'll wait, what does it matter? A minute more, a minute less . . . I'll be glad to wait. . . ."

Mariagrazia understood that she had lost and that it was going to be impossible for her to divide those two, Leo and Lisa. "It's obvious . . . he wants to wait for her," she thought, scrutinizing their two faces, "so that they can go to his place together." This idea seemed atrocious to her; she grew even more pale and jealousy shone frankly in her eyes. "All right, then," she said at last, "go on,

go wait for her out there . . . I'll give Your Lisa to you very soon, don't worry, very soon. . . ." She made a threatening gesture with her hand; an angry, bitter laugh trembled on her painted lips. Leo fixed her with a stare and then shrugged his shoulders without speaking and left, followed by Carla.

In the hallway, as if it were nothing, he wound an arm around the girl's waist; she was aware of it but resisted the temptation to free herself. "It's the end," she thought, "the end of my old life." The mirrors gleaming in the shadows reflected their joined bodies as they walked.

"Did you see that?" she said loudly. "Mamma is jealous because of Lisa." There was no response except the increased pressure of the arm, bringing her hip against the hard hip of the man. Thus united, they entered the vestibule: high white walls, square little room, with a lozenge-patterned floor.

"And who knows," she added with a humiliating sense of futility, "who knows but that it's not true."

This time the man stopped and, without releasing his hold on her, showed her his face. "And instead," he said, with an awkward smile made stupid by excitement, "do you know who she should be jealous of? You . . . yes, she should be jealous of you. . . ."

"Here we go," she thought. "Of me? Why?" she asked in a clear voice.

They looked at each other. "Will you come to me?" asked Leo, almost paternally; he saw her lower her head without answering yes or no. "It's the right moment," he thought; and he pulled her to him and was about to lean down and kiss her when the sound of voices in the hallway warned him that her mother was coming. He almost suffocated with rage; it was the second time that day that his lover had come to ruin everything at the most delicate moment. "The devil take her," he thought, listening to the woman argue with Lisa in the hallway, and although the mother showed no signs of appearing, Carla twisted restlessly to free herself, saying, "Let me go, here comes Mamma."

Furious, Leo looked at the door and then around the room; he had not decided to let go of that supple waist; and now his eyes

lighted on a curtain concealing a door to the right of the vestibule. He stretched out an arm and switched off the light. "Come here," he murmured into the darkness, trying to drag Carla into his hiding place, "come back behind here . . . we'll play a joke on your mother."

She didn't understand; she resisted; her eyes gleamed in the shadows: "Why . . . but why?" she repeated. Yet at last she yielded, and they hid behind the curtain, flattening themselves against the doorway; Leo wound his arm around the girl's waist again. "Now you'll see," he murmured; but Carla saw nothing. Upright and rigid, she closed her eyes in the night created by the fluttering curtain with its dusty smell and let Leo's hand wander over her cheeks and neck. "Now you'll see," he whispered. The curtain trembled from top to bottom as she felt the man's lips press themselves to her breast, slide awkwardly up to her chin, and come to rest at last on her mouth: a brief but deep kiss. The voices came nearer, and Leo straightened back up. "Here she is," he murmured in the darkness, and his arm held Carla to him with a confident, intimate strength and certainty that had been lacking before.

The glass-paned door opened; Carla pulled the curtain slightly aside and peeked out. In the luminous square of the open door the figure of her mother, spattered with highlights and shadows, expressed astonishment and incomprehension. "They're not here!" exclaimed the familiar voice; and Lisa, invisible, asked from the hallway, "Well, where could they have gone?"

A question without answer. Mariagrazia stretched her neck and stuck her head into the vestibule as if to explore it; shadow hollowed out her haggard features and turned the flabby, painted face into a mask, petrified in an expression of pathetic bewilderment. Every wrinkle, the half-open mouth blackened with lipstick, the staring eyes, the entire face seemed to scream out, "Leo's not here . . . Leo has abandoned me! Leo has left!"

Carla observed her with mixed curiosity and compassion. She could feel, intuitively, the fear trembling behind that mask, and she seemed to be seeing the same face in the days to come, when

her mother would have discovered her lover's and daughter's betrayals; the image lasted an instant; then the head withdrew. "That's strange," she could hear the voice saying. "Merumeci's coat is still here, but they're not."

"Maybe they're in the entrance hall," answered Lisa; and so, voicing suppositions and wonder, they both wandered off.

"Did you see?" murmured Leo once more, bending forward and clasping the girl to his breast as before.

"It's the end," she thought once again, offering up her mouth; she liked this darkness, which kept her from seeing the man and left her illusions intact; she liked this intrigue. They separated. "Now let's come out," she murmured, drawing back the curtain, "let's come out, Leo, so they can find out we're here."

He yielded reluctantly, and they snuck out from their hiding place one after the other like thieves; the light was dazzling; they stared at each other. "Is my hair messed up?" Carla asked, and he shook his head. "So now what will we say to Mamma?" she added.

A crude maliciousness lit up the man's flushed and excited face; he slapped his thigh and laughed. "Oh, that was a good one!" he cried. "Such a good one! What will we tell them? That we were here, naturally . . . that we were here all the time."

"No, Leo," said Carla doubtfully, looking at him and crossing her hands on her belly, "really?"

"Really," he repeated. "Ah, here she comes."

The door opened and the mother reappeared. "But they're here!" she exclaimed, turning to Lisa. "And here we were searching for them all over the house. . . . Where were you?"

Leo gestured in surprise: "We were here all the time."

Mariagrazia looked at him as one might look at some poor madman. "Don't talk nonsense. I was here a little while ago and there was no one in here and it was all dark."

"Well," replied the man placidly, taking his coat from the rack, "it must mean that you're suffering from hallucinations. We've been here the whole time. . . . Isn't that right, Carla?" he asked, turning to the girl.

"Absolutely," she replied, after a brief hesitation.

A menacing silence ensued. The mother had the impression that everyone was making fun of her, but she couldn't figure out the reason; she suspected hidden motives and Machiavellian mysteries. Irritated and uncertain, her eyes wove a web of suspicion between Leo, Carla, and Lisa.

"You're crazy," she said at last. "Five minutes ago there was no one here. Lisa can vouch for that, she was with me," she added, pointing to her friend.

"It's true, there was no one," Lisa said calmly.

Another silence. "And Carla can vouch for us, that we were both here," said Leo, launching a conspiratorial look at the girl. "It's the simple truth, isn't that right, Carla?"

"That's right," she confessed, feeling confused. For the first time she was struck by the fact of it: there was no contesting that when her mother had come in they had been there, in the vestibule.

"All right," said her mother bitterly, "that's fine . . . you two are right, I'm crazy and Lisa is, too." She fell silent for an instant. "That Leo should permit himself to indulge in this kind of joke," she burst out then, turning toward Carla, "is his own business. But that *you* should make fun of me . . . you should be ashamed of yourself . . . a lot of respect you have for your mother."

"But it's the truth, Mamma," Carla protested. The joke had become painful to her now, sinking like a thorn into the impatience that possessed her. "We were in the vestibule." She wanted to add, "We were behind the curtain, Leo and I, in each other's arms"; she could imagine the scene that would break out at these words, but it would be the last scene; then everything would be over.

Meanwhile Lisa said, looking bored, "Shall we go, Merumeci?" And he, who was ready to leave, held out his hand to his lover. "Think about it," he couldn't help saying with a smile, "think about it all night long."

Mariagrazia responded with a shrug. "*I* sleep at night." Then she hugged Lisa, whispering to her, "Now remember what I told you."

Carla opened the door, and a gust of cold wind blew into the room. The other two walked out and disappeared.

4

THEY CLIMBED UP TOGETHER, mother and daughter, to the second floor. When they reached the second-floor hall Mariagrazia, who had been so offended by the joke in the vestibule that she had not so far uttered a word, asked the girl what she planned to do the next day.

"Tennis," replied Carla; after which, without embracing, they went to their respective rooms.

In Carla's bedroom the lamp, which she had forgotten to switch off, was still lit, and in its white radiance it seemed that the furniture and everything else had been waiting for her arrival. She walked in and went immediately and mechanically to look at herself in the large mirror of her wardrobe: nothing abnormal in her face except for her eyes, which were drawn, tired, yet mysteriously shining; a bluish black circle ringed round them, and their deep gaze, filled with hopes and illusions, disturbed her as if it belonged to someone else. She stayed there a moment, leaning with her hands on the mirror; then she drew back, sat down, and looked around her. In many ways the room could have belonged

to a three- or four-year-old child: its furniture was all white, low, and easy to clean; its walls were white with light blue designs; a row of dolls with crooked heads and upturned eyes sat ragged and neglected on the little settee beneath the window. It was furnished just as it had been when she was a child, and her mother, being short on money, had never managed to replace it with other furniture more appropriate to her age; besides, she had asked Carla, why did she need new stuff, since she would get married eventually and move out of the house? So Carla had grown up in the narrow framework of her earliest years; but the room had not remained as it was at that time, childish and bare, since every stage of her life had left its stamp on it, if only in trinkets and rags, so that now the bedroom was full, comfortable, and intimate. But it was ambiguous in its intimacy, at times womanly (for example, her vanity with its ruined ribbons, its perfumes, face powders, lotions, cosmetics, and those two broad pink garters hung up on either side of the mirror) and at times childish; and a lax, completely feminine disorder made up of clothing abandoned on chairs, open perfume bottles, and overturned high heels rendered this ambiguity even more complex.

Carla looked around at these things in a kind of tranquil stupor; not a single thought presented itself for her contemplation. She was sitting on her bed, in her bedroom, and the lamp was lit; everything was in its place like every other evening, that's all. . . . She began to undress, taking off her shoes, her dress, her stockings . . . but during these habitual acts she was furtively observing her surroundings, finding now the bristly head of a doll, now the clothes rack loaded down with dresses, now the dressing table, now the lamp. And that light, that special, peaceful, familiar light that not only illuminated but seemed to shine from *within* the objects in the room, and which, together with the firmly closed window veiled by dazzling white half-curtains, gave her a pleasureable yet slightly distressing sense of security. . . . Yes, there was no doubt about it, she was in *her* room, in *her* house. It was probable that outside those walls lay the night, but she was separated from it by that light, by those things, so that she could

ignore it and feel that she was alone, yes, completely alone and out of the world.

She finished undressing. Completely naked, shaking her great tousled head, she got up and went to the wardrobe to pick out a new nightgown, taking the few steps lightly on the tips of her toes. She opened the drawer and noticed, as she bent forward, that her large breasts were moving as well, on their own, right before her eyes; as she straightened back up she saw herself in the mirror and was struck by the clumsy, almost shameful attitude of her whole naked body and by the disproportion between her too-large head and her slender shoulders, perhaps on account of her hair. She took up a mirror from the shelf in the closet and held it behind the nape of her neck; her hair was too long; "I should have it cut," she thought.

She looked at herself again . . . hmm . . . her legs were a little crooked — oh just a bit! — from the knees on down, and her breasts . . . her breasts hung too low; if she lifted them a little, in her two hands . . . "That's how they should be," she thought. She turned her head, trying to get a glimpse of her back; but then, as she was trying to peer over her shoulders to see that other image of herself in its entirety, she was assailed by the contrast between the futility of these poses of hers and the grave events of the day: Leo had kissed her, she recalled, only a few minutes ago. She turned away from the mirror and went back to the bed.

She sat down and remained immobile a moment, with her eyes fixed on the floor. "Truly, a new life is beginning," she thought at last, and she raised her head. Suddenly it seemed to her that that tranquil, pure, safe room and her petty, rather silly habits were all one living thing, one single person whose form was defined and for whom she was underhandedly preparing, pretending it didn't matter, an outrageous betrayal. "In a little while it's good-bye forever," she told herself, with a nervous and sorrowful joy, and she waved good-bye from her bed to the objects surrounding it as if from a ship in departure. Crazy, vast, sad fantasies passed through her mind; it seemed to her that a fatal connection linked these events. "Isn't it strange?" she said to herself.

"Tomorrow I'll give myself to Leo and so a new life should begin . . . and tomorrow is the exact day I was born." She remembered her mother; "and it's with your man," she thought, "with *your man*, Mamma, that I'm leaving." Even this ignoble coincidence, this rivalry with her mother, pleased her; everything had to be base, impure, and filthy; there could be no more love or sympathy, only a dark sense of ruin. "Create a scandalous, impossible situation, shameful, full of awful scenes," she thought, "ruin myself utterly . . ." Her head was hanging down, and at a certain point, raising her eyes, she saw herself in the wardrobe mirror, and without knowing why she began to tremble throughout her whole body; she wished she could cry and pray, and it seemed to her that because of all these sad thoughts she was already hopelessly lost. "Where is my life going?" she repeated, staring at the floor. "Where is it going?"

Finally the painful words lost their meaning; she realized that she was no longer thinking at all, and that she was naked, and that she was sitting on the edge of her bed; the lamp was shining, the objects around her were in the same place they were every night; her earlier exaltation had left her with nothing more than an empty bitterness; it seemed to her that she had with great effort approached the pure core of her problem and then inexplicably lost it from sight.

"Whatever will happen will happen," she thought, picking up her nightgown and slipping it on lazily. She slid under the covers, turned out the light, and closed her eyes.

5

No servant lived at Lisa's apartment; she didn't want one there. For indispensible things like cooking and housework, she brought in a lively little woman who was also the caretaker of the building. This system, of course, was not without its inconveniences, but Lisa, who lived a free, even dissolute life, preferred it that way.

That morning she woke up late. For some time now she had gotten home after midnight, slept without pleasure, and risen almost more tired and nervous than the day before. Now she awoke with difficulty and looked around without raising her head: a thin, dusty darkness, pierced like a sieve by a thousand threads of light, filled the room, and looming like ghosts in the shadow were the furnishings, speechless and dead, the silent mirrors, and the clothes hanging from the dark splotch of the door; the air was heavy with the odor of sleep and old furniture; the window was shut.

Lisa got out of bed, smoothed back the hair hanging over her face, which was clammy with sweat, went to the window, and drew up the blinds; white day invaded the room. She pulled back

the curtain; the window was beaded with vapor — it must be cold — and beyond this dew she could just make out some vague, pure, tenuous colors: a white and a green dissolved, it seemed, in a lake of water. Pushing aside this liquid veil with the palm of her hand, she immediately saw a slice of reddish roof so dull, opaque, and indifferent that she had no need to look farther up to see if the sky was gray. She turned away and took a few steps around the cluttered room. The big double bed, made of coarse, dark walnut and mounded with rumpled white sheets took up a great deal of space and was so close to the window that sometimes, on winter nights, she loved to lie under her warm covers and watch the wave of rain pouring from the vast, torrential night onto the squared panes of glass just a meter away. Aside from the bed, there were two huge wardrobes made of the same homely, malodorous wood and hung with immense yellowed mirrors. Although the room was large enough, these massive furnishings took up so much space that there was hardly room to move around in.

Lisa went to the wardrobe. All she had on was a transparent nightshirt that emphasized, even more than usual, the bulges of her body. Her legs were completely bare, right up to the deep fold that divided the globes of her buttocks from her hairless white thighs; her muscular breasts, hardly any lower than when she was twenty, spilled halfway out of the shirt, two smooth swellings crisscrossed with veins. She caught sight of herself in one of the mirrors, half-naked and bent over forward as if to hide, beneath the too-short veil, the dark stain of her pubis, and decided she had become thinner. Then she slipped on a robe and went into the bathroom.

This was a gray, bare, cold little room with dull, painted pipes. The tub was made of enameled metal; the single mirror was all splotched with rust; a damp shadow filled up the corners. Lisa turned on the light. It occurred to her that the last time she had washed her whole body was three days ago, and that she should take a bath; but then she hesitated — was it really necessary? She looked down at her feet: her toenails were white, they seemed clean. No, there was no need to bathe, especially since, as was

probable, she would spend the night with Michele and so have to take a bath all over again the next day; she decided she wouldn't. She went over to the sink attached to the wall, opened the faucets, and waited until it filled up; then she took off her robe, lowered the nightshirt to her waist and washed — first her face, sneezing and huffing, then, taking care that the water didn't drip down from her shoulders and breasts onto her lower parts, still filled with the damp warmth of sleep, her armpits and neck. Each time she bent over she felt the shirt climb up her back; the chill of the stone rose up through her feet from the floor tiles. In the end, she couldn't find a towel and scurried, naked and blinded, into the bedroom to get one.

She dried herself off, sat down at her dressing table, and spent a moment arranging her hair. Since she used no creams or makeup, all she had to do was dab on a little powder and perfume and comb her hair; then she turned her back to the mirror and bent down to pull on her stockings. Two thoughts were now alternating in her mind: breakfast and Michele. She loved to eat delicious things in the morning with her coffee — sweet jams, petit fours, butter, almond pastries; she was a glutton and never got up from the table until she was stuffed, but today she was afraid she might have to fast. "If Michele comes soon," she thought, "it's better if he doesn't find me eating. Oh, well . . . another time." She straightened up, put on a matching set of pink lingerie and then a slip with a bust so tight it bound her breasts like a corset. In her fantasy, as consolation for food foregone, she pictured a Michele who was shy and madly in love, an inexpert adolescent to whom she would give herself trembling with joy — that is, a pure love. "After the life I've led," she convinced herself, "a little innocence will do me good." Sleepless nights, labored pleasures, joyless arousals — this filthy fog dissolved. Michele would bring her the sun, the blue sky, candor, and enthusiasm; he would respect her as if she were a goddess and would lean his head on her knees. She looked forward to this with insatiable desire, couldn't wait to drink from this fountain of youth, to return to this new, stammering, modest love that she had almost forgotten for twenty

years. Michele was purity, and she would give herself to the boy without lust, almost without ardor; she would dance toward him all naked and then she would say to him, "Take me." It would be an extraordinary love, the kind that doesn't happen anymore.

She had finished getting dressed; she walked out of the bedroom, across the dark hall, and into the light-filled boudoir. This room was all pink and white: the furniture and the ceiling were white, and the rugs, wallpaper, and sofa were pink. Three large windows veiled by filmy curtains provided a diffuse and peaceful light, and at first glance everything looked wholesome and innocent; one noticed a thousand charming touches — a little basket for embroidery here, a little library of multicolored books there, some slender flowers on the lacquered shelves, some watercolors under glass on the walls — a whole series of things that made one think, just at first, "Oh, what a darling little place, so light and serene — some young girl must live here." But looking more closely, one realized that the boudoir was no younger than the rest of the apartment: the lacquer on the furniture was yellowed and peeling, the wallpaper was discolored and cracked, tattered upholstery and filthy cushions covered the couch in the corner. Yet another look rounded it off, revealing the tears in the curtains, the broken glass of the paintings, the books threadbare and dusty, the wide cracks in the ceiling. And then, of course, if the mistress of the house was in, there was no need to look further: all this corruption coalesced before one's eyes as if embodied in the person of the woman.

Lisa sat down at her desk and waited; now the idea of breakfast was back and she wanted it badly, didn't know if she could make it without eating. "If I only knew what time he was coming," she thought irritably, glancing at her wristwatch; but at last she controlled herself, renounced breakfast again, and returned to her tender, cruel, and excited fantasies. "I'll make him sit on the couch," she thought suddenly, "and I'll stretch out behind him. We'll talk a little . . . then I'll start to tease him, I'll bring up something indecent . . . and I'll *look* at him . . . if he's not a fool, he'll understand." She examined the couch as if it

were an instrument whose worth and efficiency she wished to appraise. And if all went well, she'd make the adolescent boy wait, just for the delicate pleasure of watching him sigh, and finally, after a few days, she'd invite him to supper and keep him all night. . . . What a supper that would be: delicacies and, above all, wine. She would wear that blue dress that looked so good on her and put on the few jewels she had managed to save from the rapacious hands of her ex-husband. The table would be set here in the boudoir, since the dining room was less intimate — a table for two, loaded down with good things: fish, meat and vegetable pastries, and sweets; a small, rich, sparkling table for two, just for two, a third wouldn't fit even he wanted to. . . . Her eyes shining with joy and tenderness, she would sit opposite her dear boy, and even while eating she would never cease gazing at him; she would pour him wine, lots of wine, and converse with him in a playful, curious, suggestive, yet maternal tone; she would make him tell her about his little loves, she would make him blush; every once in a while she would wink at him encouragingly; they would touch feet under the table. When supper was over, they would clear off the table together, laughing, touching and bumping into each other in their great desire to possess one another; then she would undress and slip on a nightgown, and she would give Michele a pair of her husband's pajamas to wear; they would fit him perfectly, since they were both the same height although the boy was more slender; seated on the couch she and Michele would know the urgent, avaricious joy of this, the eve of their first night together. Finally they would go together into the bedroom.

Somewhat aroused by these fantasies, she sat at her desk with her forehead lowered. Every once in a while she ran her hands through her hair as if to push back her thoughts, or, without ceasing to think, twisted her feet and regarded her shoes. The sound of the doorbell made her heart beat faster; she smiled, looked at herself in a mirror, and went out into the hall.

Before she opened the door, she turned on the light. Michele came in.

"Perhaps I've come too early?" he said, hanging his coat and hat on the rack.

"You must be joking." They passed into the boudoir and sat down on the couch.

"How's it going?" asked Lisa, picking up a box of cigarettes and offering one to the boy; he refused and appeared lost in thought, with his hands on his knees.

"It's going well," he said at last; then there was silence.

"If you don't mind," said the woman, "I'm going to stretch out on the couch, but you stay . . . stay . . . comfortable." She raised her legs and leaned back against the cushions. Michele saw her two white, clumsy thighs and smiled inside himself; the idea came back to him: "Evidently she wants to excite me"; but Lisa didn't appeal to him, she really didn't, and all this left him cold and indifferent.

She was watching the boy, thinking about what she could say to him; all those excuses for closer intimacy, which only a few minutes before had seemed so spontaneous to her, had now slipped her mind in her excitement. Her head was empty, her heart in turmoil; then she remembered, she wasn't sure why, the scene from last night, that quarrel between Leo and Michele that had interested her so much at the time. Although she hesitated to mention it, the idea that she might revenge herself, even a little, on her old lover by revealing his affair (if Michele didn't already know about it) with the boy's own mother encouraged her; and then, by indirect means, she could lead them into more exciting conversation.

"I bet," she said, looking at him, "that you're dying to know why I asked you last night not to apologize to Leo."

He turned toward her. "It's *you* who are dying to tell me about it," he would have liked to retort, but he contained himself, saying, "I wouldn't say 'dying,' but go ahead and tell me."

"I think I may have more right than anyone else to open your eyes," she began.

"I don't doubt it."

"You can keep your mouth shut for a long time, you can pretend not to see . . . but in the end too much is too much . . . and what I witnessed last night revolted me."

"Excuse me," said Michele, "but what, exactly, revolted you?"

"That apology to Leo," she replied, gazing at him intently and seriously, "above all because it was your mother, your *mother*, who demanded that you humiliate yourself like that."

"Ah, now I get it," thought Michele, and his face brightened with irony, "she wants to break the big news that my mother has a lover." He was seized by a sharp disgust for himself and the woman. "Maybe it wasn't a humiliation," he said.

"Yes it was, no matter what the circumstances . . . doubly so when you hear what I'm about to tell you. . . ."

He looked at her. "If I grabbed you around the hips right now, or pinched you on the backside," he thought, "how quickly you'd lose that secret and dignified air, how you'd wriggle!"

"I warn you," he said, and he seemed to himself to be truly sincere, "that it doesn't matter to me to know about anything."

"All right, great," replied Lisa, not disconcerted in the slightest, "you're right. But I feel that I have to tell you . . . and you'll thank me afterward. Anyway, you should know that your mother has made a mistake. . . ."

"Only one?"

Lisa had two choices: to get annoyed or to laugh; she chose the second. "She may have made thousands," she said, sliding closer to the boy, "but this is surely the biggest."

"Just a minute," interrupted Michele. "I don't know what you're about to tell me, but if it's as serious as it sounds, I'd like to know why you're revealing it to me."

They stared at each other. "Why?" echoed Lisa, slowly lowering her eyes. "Because I'm very concerned about it and also because I'm fond of you, and then because, as I already told you, certain injustices revolt me."

Michele knew of the ties that had bound Leo and Lisa. "Or rather," he thought, "it revolts you that she carried him away with

her, eh?" but he nodded his head gravely. "You're right, there's nothing worse than injustice. So, go on, what does this error consist of?"

"Well . . . ten years ago your mother knew Leo Merumeci. . . ."

"Surely you're not going to tell me," interrupted Michele, with an incredibly phony expression of fear, "that Leo is my mother's *lover?*"

They looked at each other. "I'm sorry," said Lisa, with pained simplicity, "but that's how it is."

Silence. Michele stared at the floor and tried not to laugh; his disgust had turned into a bitter sense of absurdity.

"And now you can understand," Lisa went on, "why I was revolted, and how much I was revolted, by your mother asking you to humiliate yourself in front of that man."

He neither moved nor spoke. Once again he was seeing his mother, and Leo, and he himself in the act of begging forgiveness — small, stupid figures, hopelessly lost in a vaster sea of life. . . . But these visions neither offended him nor woke any feeling within him. He would have liked to be completely the opposite — indignant, filled with rancor and unquenchable hatred — but he suffered instead from being utterly indifferent.

He saw Lisa rise and come to sit down by his side. "Now, now," she said, placing an awkward hand on his head to console him, "now, now . . . be strong . . . I understand that it must be hard for you. We live with the conviction that a person deserves our affection, our respect, and then . . . at a certain point, everything collapses around us . . . but it doesn't matter . . . this will be a lesson to you."

He shook his head, biting his lips to keep from laughing, while Lisa believed him to be overcome by his sorrow. "It's an ill wind that blows no good," she said, in a bathetic, honeyed voice, never ceasing to stroke the boy's hair with her hand. "This will make us closer . . . do you want me to be what your mother was for you before? Tell me . . . do you want me to become your friend, your confidante?" She was sincere, but her voice was so fluty and false that Michele wanted to cover her mouth with his hand. But he re-

mained motionless, keeping his head down stubbornly, for he *saw* himself, sitting next to that woman on the edge of the couch, his face wearing an expression somewhere between contrite and moronic; and the whole scene seemed so ridiculous to him that there was only one way not to laugh: not to move.

Lisa became even more zealous: "You'll come pay me visits . . . we'll talk . . . we'll put things back together, reorganize a new existence." He glanced at her through his lowered lashes: she was red, under her blond bangs she was red and excited. "Ah, so this is how one begins to reorganize," he thought, and he recalled her relative that was supposed to have shown up this morning. Why not take the whole thing at face value, why not take advantage of it? Why not continue in the pretense?

He raised his head. "It's been hard," he offered, like someone who has managed to master a great sorrow, "but you're right . . . I need to create a new existence for myself."

"Of course," said Lisa, with fervent approval. A deep silence ensued. Each of them, for different purposes, pretended to be lost in a dreamy, inspired distractedness; they sat motionless, one beside the other, and stared at the floor.

A rustle: Michele's arm slid behind the woman's back and encircled her waist.

"No," she said in a clear voice, without moving or turning, as if in response to some inner question. Michele smiled despite himself; he felt a certain excitement invade him, and he drew her closer. "No, no," she repeated, more faintly; but then she surrendered and leaned her lost head on the boy's shoulder. After a moment of sentimental immobility, he took her by the chin and, notwithstanding the false, mute protest in her eyes, kissed her on the mouth.

They separated. "You're bad," said Lisa pathetically, with a half-smile of gratitude, "bad and domineering." Michele raised his eyes and looked at her coldly; then a smile flickered across his thin, serious face and he stretched out a hand and, with all the strength he had, pinched her in the ribs under her armpit.

"Ow, ow, ow," she screamed suddenly, laughing with her

mouth wide open and wriggling all over, "ow, ow!" She was waving her arms and legs; in the end she fell off the couch and her whole body jerked uncontrollably, so that her dress slid up over her belly, exposing her thick, white thighs shadowed with muscles. Michele let her go; she sat back down on the couch and lowered her dress, smoothing it over her knees.

"Oh, what a wicked boy!" she cried in falsetto, pressing a palm to her panting breast, "what a wicked boy!" Michele said nothing, but he observed her seriously, with grave curiosity. "Instead of that," she went on, placing her hands on his shoulders, "you should do me like this, look. . . ." She pursed her narrow, heart-shaped lips, pressed them lightly to the boy's, and drew back, her eyes lustrous with satisfaction. "*That's* how you should do me," she repeated stupidly, to hide her excitement.

Michele made a face, stood up, and began to pace around the room with his hands in his pockets, looking at the banal watercolors hanging on the walls. He was irritated and aroused.

"Do you like them?" he heard suddenly from behind him.

"Pieces of shit," he said.

"Really," replied the woman, mortified. "I always thought they were so good."

They went back to the couch. The boy's temples were throbbing, his cheeks were on fire. "This is all so vile," he thought in disgust; but as soon as they sat down, he threw Lisa back onto the cushions as if he wanted to take her; and he watched that face close its moist eyelids and abandon itself to a kind of repugnant, ridiculous ecstasy. The impression it made on him was so strong that he lost all desire; he kissed the woman's mouth coldly, and then, with a sort of a moan, he collapsed with his head in her lap. Darkness. "I want to stay here till the end of the visit," he thought, "and not look at her again, and not kiss her again."

He felt her fingers caressing and smoothing his hair.

"What's the matter?" asked the false, familiar voice.

"I'm thinking," he replied in a deep voice, still closing his eyes, "about how little effort it would take to live sincerely, and how we do everything instead to do exactly the opposite." He sighed; he

felt he had defined himself. "Why am I staying here?" he thought. "Why am I lying? It would be so easy to tell the truth and go away."

"You're right, that's just how it is," the woman answered him, without ceasing to stroke his hair, "just exactly how it is . . . but now you don't have to have these thoughts anymore . . . and you won't need anyone else . . . now I'm here, and we'll be together . . . we'll ignore the whole world." She uttered these words in so fervent a voice that it made the boy shiver. "We'll live far away from the things that hurt you, all right? From all these miseries. . . . You'll tell me the story of your life, and what you don't like, and what makes you sad . . . and I'll give you all the love that I have, that I've kept in reserve just for you. . . . I'll be your companion, your partner, would you like that? Your faithful and humble companion, so humble, you know, that she'll listen to you in silence and console you with her caresses, like this . . . like this. . . ." The hand with which Lisa was stroking his head contracted; she leaned over and kissed the boy's hair and the nape of his neck in a fury, while her feverish fingers nervously gripped his curved shoulders — "Oh, Michele" — and her heart trembled. "At last I love and am loved," she thought, "oh, at last."

Michele didn't move. Never before had he seen absurdity confound itself to such a degree with sincerity, or falsity with truth. A terrible embarrassment seized him. "If only she'd shut up," he thought, "but no, she has to talk." At moments he was gripped by a hysterical desire to tell the truth, *his* truth, the only possible truth, and go, but a sense of compassion kept him there. And besides, hadn't *he* been the one, the first one, to deceive Lisa with his embrace?

"My dear . . . my dear," she was saying over and over, above his head, "you can't imagine how dear you are to me."

"Exaggerator," he wanted to say; but his eyes were full of darkness; he felt that he had never seen the light; those words, those caresses, that voice all gave him the sensation of a night without hope.

He raised his head and sat up, rubbing his dazzled eyes. "It's probably time for me to go," he said. "When is this relative of yours coming over?"

"I'll go call him," said Lisa, who obviously hadn't been expecting this question, and she went out.

Left alone, he stood up and walked over to the wall, gazing distractedly at one of the watercolors. Then, as if absentmindedly, he approached the door and opened it a crack. The telephone was there, attached to the wall at the end of the dark hallway, but Lisa was nowhere to be seen. Her exit had been a fiction; that relative didn't exist; the woman had lied to attract the boy to her house.

"Pretend," he thought, cautiously pulling the door closed, "the right thing to do is pretend." He returned to the wall and his contemplation of the watercolor, which depicted a farmhouse and some haystacks. A slight, fastidious disgust began to oppress him, as if he were about to vomit and were trying to hold it back. Then he thought, "At bottom, she's just like me," and he softened somewhat, felt a little compassion for the woman, who had lied without need. "We're all the same," he thought. "There are thousands of ways of performing any action, and we all instinctively choose the wrong one."

After a moment the door opened and Lisa came in. "I'm so sorry," she said, "but my relative is busy. . . . He can't come over today . . . but he said he would tomorrow . . . if you can come over tomorrow afternoon."

They stared at each other. Michele's disgust and compassion grew deeper. "This is too much," he thought, "this is leading me around by the nose. And tomorrow will be the same story: come back the next day." He felt that if he pretended not to understand, there would be a complicity between them, that he would be pandering to a lie that would allow them, while they waited for the nonexistent relative, to come to an unscrupulous understanding on all other matters. "No," he said, "I'm not coming back tomorrow."

"But if he comes over," insisted the woman daringly, "and you're not here . . ."

Michele put a hand on her shoulder and looked at her. "This is all so ridiculous," he said. "He's not coming. Why don't you tell the truth?" He saw her start and then, what was worse, try to evade

his look by risking a brazen, unabashed smile, like someone who is rather pleased to have been found out. "What truth?" she said without meeting his eyes, with that smile on her face. "I don't understand what you're saying . . . unless something comes up, he'll be here for sure tomorrow."

"I looked into the hallway," explained Michele calmly. "You didn't telephone anyone. And this relative doesn't exist."

An instant of silence; then Lisa chose the easiest attitude — she smiled again and shrugged her shoulders. "So, if you looked into the hallway," she said, "why are you asking me so many questions?"

Michele looked at her closely. "Is it really possible," he thought, "that she doesn't understand, that she doesn't *feel*, that we could be better than this?" He wanted to make another effort. "No," he insisted, "don't take that tone. . . . This is something really serious. Instead of putting on that whole act, why didn't you just say, 'Come back tomorrow, we can have tea together'?"

"I should have said that, I know," she said without humility, with a kind of impatience. "But it means you'll come anyway, doesn't it? And besides, don't worry — even though I haven't spoken to my relative yet, I *will* speak to him, just as soon as I can."

"God," thought the boy, "she thinks I reproved her because I'm disappointed her damned relative didn't show up." His face hardened. "No, I won't come," he said, "and don't talk to anybody." He left her and went into the hall.

The smell of cooking filled the narrow shadows. "Do you really mean you won't come?" Lisa asked, half-pleading, half-incredulous, as she handed him his hat. He looked at her and hesitated; it had all been completely and utterly useless. He felt disgust, pity. . . . The woman remained where she was, trapped in her error. This sense of the futility of his efforts actually hurt him; he wanted to scream to relieve the desperate, agonizing boredom that was bearing down on him. "What would be the point in coming over?" he asked.

"What do you mean, what would be the point?"

"It would be pointless," he said, shaking his head, "pointless . . .

that's how you are . . . nothing to be done . . . you're all like that."

"Like what?" she insisted, blushing in spite of herself.

"Petty, mean-spirited . . . this lust to go to bed with someone . . . to think your relative would be foremost in my mind," Michele would have liked to respond; instead he replied, "All right . . . I'll come anyway." A moment of silence. "But before I go," he added, "explain something to me. Since now you're sure that I . . . that I . . . love you and that I'll come back, why are you continuing to use that subterfuge of your relative instead of telling me the truth?"

"I didn't want you to find out," she explained hesitantly, "that I'd invented that story the first time to make you come over."

"But it wasn't necessary even the first time," said Michele, looking at her intently.

"I know," she admitted humbly, "you're right. . . . But who's perfect? Besides, that relative of mine really exists, he's very rich. . . . It's just that I haven't seen him for a long time."

"That's enough," said Michele, taking her hand. "Till tomorrow, then," he began; but suddenly he realized that Lisa was looking at him strangely, with a timid yet flattering smile, and he understood. "So be it," he thought, and he leaned down, clasped the woman to his breast, and kissed her on the mouth, then let go of her and left. On the threshold he turned around to wave goodbye and saw Lisa concealing herself modestly, shamefully, like a young girl with her first love, behind a coat hanging from the coatrack, there in the shadows of the entryway; she put two fingers to her lips and blew him a kiss.

"A vile piece of theater," he thought; and without looking back, he fled down the stairs.

6

It was very late that day before Mariagrazia finished getting dressed; at noon she was still sitting in front of her dresser, stroking her eyeliner brush very carefully, and making some extraordinary faces as she did so, over her puffy eyelids. The moment she had woken up, her jealous fantasies had put her in a bad mood; but then she had remembered that Carla was turning twenty-four that day, and a sudden, hysterical gush of motherly love had flooded her soul. "My Carlotta, my poor little Carlotta," she had thought, almost weeping from tenderness. "She's the only one in the whole world who loves me." So she had gotten up and dressed, thinking about Carla's birthday; it seemed a pitiful thing, a fact so pathetic she could cry over it, and since then she hadn't stopped imagining the presents and pleasures she would so generously give to her daughter. "She doesn't have many dresses . . . I'll give her some . . . I'll give her four or five of them . . . and I'll give her a fur, she's wanted one for so long." How she was going to come up with the cash for all this beneficence was a thought that never even entered her mind. "And if only she finds a husband," she thought, "after that I won't wish for anything else." Thinking

of her daughter, still unmarried at the age of twenty-four, she was seized with a furious, reflexive anger against men in general: "All these young idiots . . . all they want to do is have fun and waste time, when they should be thinking about starting a family." But Carla would surely get married. "She's beautiful," Mariagrazia said to herself, counting her daughter's endowments on her fingers. "Actually, I'd say she was gorgeous . . . and she's good, just as good as an angel . . . and then, she's intelligent and cultured . . . she's had an excellent education . . . what more could anyone want?" Money, that's what, money was missing; Carla would go to her husband's home as naked as when she came into the world, rich only in virtues, there was no doubt about that. But where was it said that only rich girls got married these days? Hadn't there been cases lately of girls who had made wonderful matches without so much as a penny for their dowries? Somewhat encouraged, she got up and walked into the next room.

A bouquet of magnificent roses and a gift box stood on the central table; a card was stuck among the flowers. The mother plucked it out, tore open the envelope, and read: "To Carla, my almost-daughter, with fondest best wishes, Leo." She put the card back in with the flowers. "How tactful he is," she thought happily. "Another man in his position wouldn't know how to behave around his ladyfriend's children . . . and instead, he never gives any cause for suspicion . . . he's like a father." She wanted to clap her hands for joy; if Leo had been there, she would have hugged him. Then she opened up the box and saw that it contained an embroidered silk purse with a clasp of light blue stone; she felt herself brimming with joy.

She took the box and the bouquet and ran into Carla's room. "Happy birthday!" she shouted. "Look what came for you!"

Carla was sitting at her table with a book in her hand; she stood up and read the card without saying a word. Leo's impudence and self-congratulation — calling her his "almost-daughter" — made her shiver at the sudden, shocking thought of her near-incestuous relationship with the man. She raised her eyes. Her mother's were shining with joy; she was smiling in her

emotion and hugging the bunch of flowers rather ridiculously to her breast.

"Very kind of him," said Carla coldly. "So what's in the box?"

"A purse," answered her mother with enthusiasm, "a very elegant evening bag that must have cost him at least five hundred lire . . . look. . . ." She opened the box and showed the gift to her daughter. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" she added.

"Very," said Carla. She put it back on the table, and they looked at each other. "And so," said her mother suddenly, in a voice full of emotion, "my daughter turns twenty-four years old today . . . and yet it seems like just yesterday she was only a little girl."

"Yes, Mamma, to me, too," replied Carla without a shadow of irony; but she felt like adding, "and after today I won't be one anymore."

"You used to play with your dolls," continued her mother. "You rocked them in your arms and made signs for me not to talk, because you said they were sleeping." She stopped in the midst of these pathetic evocations and looked at Carla intently. "Let's hope you'll be able to do that someday with dolls of flesh and blood."

"Yes, Mamma, let's hope so," echoed the girl, caught between pity and embarrassment.

"Truly, Carla," insisted her mother, as if trying to convince her of some great and profound piece of truth, "truly, I have but one wish . . . that you should get married . . . then I'll be happy."

Carla smiled. "You . . . but will *I* be happy?" she thought. "Yes, all right," she said, lowering her head, "but it takes two to get married . . . me and him."

"He'll come along!" cried the mother with the utmost confidence. "In fact, look, this may seem ridiculous to you . . . but I have a kind of presentiment that you'll get married sometime during this new year . . . or at least get engaged. It's a feeling I have, who knows why, these are things that can't be explained. But you'll see, it will come true."

"Something else will come true," Carla was tempted to answer, thinking of her decision to give herself to Leo that very day.

Her mother's incomprehension gave her a painful sense that they were all trapped in a dark place without hope of liberation. She smiled and said firmly, "Certainly, something is bound to happen."

"I have a presentiment," repeated her mother with conviction. "Now, where shall I put these flowers?"

They put the flowers in a vase and went into the anteroom. There was very little light there; the narrow glass door to the stairs was veiled by a red curtain and shadows filled the white corners of the room. They sat down on a sofa. "So tell me," asked her mother immediately, "how did Lisa seem to you last night?"

"How did she seem to me? Like usual."

"Really?" asked Mariagrazia doubtfully. "She seemed fatter to me . . . and, I don't know . . . older."

"Well, I didn't notice it," replied Carla; she knew what her mother was driving at. "It's *me*, Mamma, that you should be jealous of," she thought, "not Lisa."

"And that dress!" the other woman went on. "I never saw anything in worse taste. . . . God knows what she thought she was wearing. . . ."

"Really?" said Carla. "It didn't seem ugly to me."

"Incredibly ugly," affirmed her mother; for an instant she fell silent, her widened eyes fixed on the empty air as if she could see the images conjured up by her jealousy take form there. Then she turned abruptly toward her daughter. "Tell the truth, though . . . did you see how Lisa was clinging to Merumeci?"

"Ah, God," thought Carla; she was so bored and irritated she wanted to scream at her, "It wasn't *Lisa*, it was *me*. . . . We were kissing behind the curtain, *kissing!*" But instead she replied, "What do you mean, clinging to him?"

"Stuck to him," echoed the other woman. "And how she was counting on having him take her home! Do you know what I think?" she added, leaning forward. "I think she'd really like to start up their old relationship again — that's why she's making eyes at him. But Merumeci has better things to do than think about her, poor woman . . . and then, if he wanted, he could find

a thousand women more attractive than she is . . . with that build, with that figure. . . . And she's *sticky* with envy and hypocrisy . . . she says 'white' to your face and 'black' behind your back. Really, I'm telling you, I'm patient with everyone, I find good qualities in everyone, I wouldn't hurt even a fly, but the truth is, I can't *stand* that woman. . . ."

"But you're her friend."

"What can you do?" said her mother. "It's not like you can always tell the truth to people's faces. Society often makes us do the exact opposite of what we'd like . . . and if we didn't, who knows where it all would end." She gestured as if to say, "Believe me, that's just how it is"; she arched her eyebrows and twisted her mouth. But Carla's face hardened; she made an effort not to look at that maternal mask. "A little more truth," she felt like shouting, "wouldn't hurt!"

"But lying for its own sake," Mariagrazia went on, "systematic hypocrisy like Lisa's, well, that's something I can't tolerate . . . anything but that. For instance, I'm sure she didn't come by to see *us* last night! She must have known somehow that Merumeci was here, that's why she dropped in. And you'll notice that she didn't have anything of interest to say, and she didn't stay long. She couldn't wait to leave."

Carla observed her with something like compassion; the laborious and painful way in which her mother dug these constructions up out of the pit of her incomprehension always inspired a disgusted pity in her. "Really?" she asked, just to say something.

"Without a doubt," the mother replied confidently; for a moment she seemed lost in thought and then, from the light-shot shadows of the doorway with its velvet curtains, her painted face contracted in a grimace of hatred. "Look . . . that woman repulses me even physically . . . I don't know . . . she gives me the impression of being so slimy and so filled with lust, so hot . . . like a bitch in heat . . . yes, she looks at men with her eyes shining in invitation . . . as if to say: come with me . . . and to think, if I were a man I wouldn't want to touch her even with the tips of my fingers . . . it would disgust me."

"Mamma, I assure you," said Carla, "that she doesn't have that effect on me at all."

"You can't understand," said her mother. "There are some things you don't know about yet. But I'm a woman of experience, I know how to live, and when I see a type like that, with those eyes, with that kind of body . . . I can peg her right away . . . tac! just like taking a photograph."

"Maybe," Carla admitted. For a moment neither of them said anything; silence; immobility; then they heard the thud of the downstairs door closing hard, down at the end of the hall. "It must be Merumeci," said the mother, getting up. "You go say hello to him, I'll be there in a minute."

Carla's heart began to beat harder; she went down the stairs step by step like someone who's feeling faint and walks slowly so as not to fall; she entered the living room and, as her mother had guessed, Leo was there, standing next to the window with his back to her. Then he turned. "Oh, here you are."

"Thanks for the gift," Carla said right away, "but why that card?"

"What card?"

"My almost-daughter," she said, staring at him intently.

"Oh!" exclaimed Leo, as if he had forgotten about it. "Right . . . that's what I wrote: 'My almost-daughter,' quite true."

"But why did you write that?"

An immodest, self-satisfied smile illumined the man's face. "First, out of respect for your mother . . . and then, because I enjoy imagining that you're my daughter."

She looked at him. "How shameless he is," she thought, "how utterly and completely shameless." But her desire for destruction was stronger than her disgust. "Me as your daughter," she said with a small smile. "I really never thought of it that way. . . . What put it into your head?"

"The other night," replied Leo tranquilly, "while we were behind the curtain . . . well, right then I remembered, who knows why, that I had seen you as a child, you only came up to here, with bare legs and braids on your shoulders, and I thought, 'God, I could be her father and yet . . .'"

"And yet we're in love with each other, right?" finished Carla, looking into his eyes. "But don't you think these two things are, how shall I put it — irreconcilable?"

"Why?" replied Leo, still smiling, rubbing his forehead. "Maybe in general . . . but in individual cases everyone acts on their own feelings."

"But it's against nature!"

Leo laughed into the girl's earnest, distressed face. "Yes, but since you're *not* my daughter, the thought doesn't count." They looked at each other.

"By the way," he added, "before I forget: after dinner make up some excuse to go down to the garden . . . the part by the grove . . . and I'll catch up with you in a minute. Understand?"

She nodded her head. Satisfied, Leo crossed his arms and gazed up at the ceiling; he didn't want to touch her, since he was expecting her mother's indiscreet entrance at any moment. "No need to get all hot and excited when I can't do anything about it," he thought. "Better to put it all off until later when nobody else is around and I'll have time for it." But if he looked at Carla, his face flamed like a lantern; he wanted to grab her, hug her, take her right there on the couch, right that minute. And this raging appetite strengthened his resentment toward his lover; he recalled the jealous scene Mariagrazia had made the night before and was seized by a pitiless anger. "Your mother," he said to Carla abruptly, "is a goose of the first magnitude."

Carla turned and was about to answer him, but stopped at the sound of doors opening and closing; her mother came in, practically dragging Michele by the hand. "Hello, Merumeci," she shouted at her lover, then, without any transition, she pointed at her son. "Michele here says," she proclaimed, "that if we put the house up for auction instead of giving it to you, we can pay you and still have about ten thousand lire left over for ourselves. Is that true?"

Leo's face darkened. "That's a stupid move," he said without moving. "No one will ever offer you more for the house than I have."

"But actually," said Michele, coming forward, "you're not giving us anything . . . you're kicking us out, that's all."

"I've given it to you already," answered Leo, irritated and annoyed, looking at the white sky filling the window, "and besides," he added in a resentful tone, "do what you want . . . sell the house, give it away, whatever you want. . . . But I warn you, I'm not going to lift a finger to help you with any of it. And the day the mortgage is due that amount of money needs to be right here, in my hands."

Leo knew the kind of risk he was incurring with these words; what if they really put the house up for auction? In that case its true value would be revealed and the deal would go up in smoke. But the mother, who knew absolutely nothing about auctions and sales, who had the vague impression that "business" was synonymous with "swindling," and who, above all, feared that her lover would abandon her and would do anything to ingratiate herself with him, reassured him.

"No," she intervened, "maybe not at an auction . . . but you, Merumeci, could offer us better conditions. We could come to a compromise."

"What compromise?" asked the man, without looking at her.

"Well, for instance," said the mother, with sublime stupidity, "you could let us live here as tenants until Michele goes to work and starts making money, and Carla gets married."

A high, forced, scornful burst of laughter greeted this proposition. "Then I'd be waiting for quite a while," Leo said finally, having exhausted his false hilarity. "*Quite* a while." He looked at Carla, and in her sad, resigned eyes read the question, "Afterward, who will want to marry me?" But the emotion this roused in him was neither pity nor sorrow — only vanity, a pride in being the living destiny of her life.

"What?" asked her mother, offended. "What do you mean?"

"I wouldn't want to be misunderstood," explained Leo. "I don't doubt that Carla will get married very soon and I hope so with all my heart . . . but as far as Michele goes, I don't think he'll be earning any money for years, and I don't think he's even on the

right road to it. No, dear lady, I must say I harbor grave doubts on that point."

For several moments Michele, who had only reluctantly been dragged by his mother into this discussion, had not said a word; but now, hearing himself so openly accused of laziness and incompetence, he understood that he must take action despite his indifference. "Now is the time to get angry," he thought, and he took a step forward. "I," he said, in an utterly phony voice, "am not what you think I am! And I'll prove, with facts, that I can work and earn money like anyone else . . . you'll see," he added, inwardly admiring his mother's face, full of pride and approval, "that even without your help I can manage to support myself and my family."

"Right! Exactly!" cried Mariagrazia, passing a proud hand over her son's head as he smiled at her in pity. "Michele will work and get rich," she said exaltedly. "*We* don't *need* anyone else!"

But Leo was not that stupid; he shrugged his shoulders furiously. "What crap!" he shouted. "With Michele you never know whether he's joking or speaking in earnest. You're a fool, Michele, you really are, you're nothing more than a joke." His indignation had reached its apex; if there was one thing he couldn't abide, it was messing around with *business*; he wanted to leave them all there and stalk off.

Michele took another step forward. "A joke?" he asked. Was it or was it not a grave insult and damage to his honor and his reputation to be called a joke? To judge from his own sense of calm indifference, it was not; but if he thought instead about the significance of the word and the dismissive feeling that had inspired it, it certainly was. "I should act," he thought, with a kind of drunkenness, "slap him, for instance." There was not a moment to lose, Leo was there, only a few steps away, leaning in the doorway against the velvet curtain; the cheek he should strike was in the full light, and it was broad, florid, well-nourished, cleanshaven; Michele's whole hand could fit over it, there was no fear of not hitting the mark . . . so . . .

"So I'm a joke," he said in a colorless voice as he advanced. "Don't you think that might offend me?"

"I don't care, go ahead and feel offended," replied Leo with a nonchalant smile, but watching him with attention.

"All right, then, take this!" Michele raised his hand, but with surprising rapidity his wrist was grabbed, his gesture cut short. Without even knowing how it had happened, he found himself squashed against the corner of the window; Leo was grasping him by the wrists and the women had rushed up behind him, full of concern.

"So, you wanted to slap me," said the man at last with a sort of calm sarcasm, "but you were mistaken. The man isn't born yet who could do that. . . ." Although he spoke calmly, he was clenching his teeth. Behind him, Mariagrazia was crying, "What's happening? Why?" And Michele, despite his uncomfortable position, was struck above all by the strong, certain elegance of the man: a double-breasted jacket of brown cloth hugged his back; his shirt was fresh and white; a starched collar of dazzling white linen fit his shaved neck to perfection; and a tobacco-colored tie shot through with gold threads and impeccably knotted was inserted into his vest. Michele observed all this in just a few seconds, then raised his eyes and said, "Let me go!"

"No, my dear boy," Leo answered. "No, I won't let you go, I need to talk to you for another half hour." Meanwhile Carla and the mother had come between them. "Let him go, Merumeci," said the girl, placing one hand on her brother's shoulder and looking at her lover. "You can talk to him without holding him that way, can't you?"

The two men separated. "I don't have anything else to say to him," declared Leo dryly, "except that it's time for him to cut it out. Apart from the fact that all this is intolerable, it doesn't seem to be the best way to come to a compromise."

"You're so very, very right," said the mother, flattering him urgently, "but don't pay attention to Michele . . . he doesn't know what he's doing."

"And you do!" thought the boy, looking at her. "Then why did you drag me into it?" he asked, approaching her.

"And that's why," she continued, paying no attention herself to her son's interruption, "if you want to talk about this whole business, you should talk about it with me."

"So that's how it is?" said Leo, looking around at their doubtful faces. "All right, I'll tell you my final conditions once and for all: I'll let you stay in the house until you've found somewhere else to live . . . and then, besides that . . . I'll give you some money . . . let's see . . . say, thirty thousand lire."

"Thirty thousand lire?" repeated Mariagrazia, eyes wide and staring. "What?"

"Let me explain," said Leo. "You say the value of the house is greater than the total amount of the mortgage. I say it's not, but to show you that I'm a true friend, I'll give you thirty thousand lire in addition to cover expenses for . . . I don't know . . . whatever work might have been done to it lately . . . whatever improvements may have been made to it since the mortgage."

"But the house is worth more, Merumeci," insisted the mother sorrowfully, "it's worth more than that. . . ."

"Then do you know what I suggest you do?" replied Leo calmly. "Sell it to someone else. You'll see that in spite of the thirty thousand you won't even be able to pay me. First of all, with the economic crisis it's a bad time, no one's buying and everyone wants to sell, all you have to do is look at page four of a newspaper to realize that. . . . And then, since the house is outside the city, it's hard to find anyone who wants to come all the way out here to live. . . . But do what you want, the last thing in the world I want is to regret that I gave you poor advice."

"I'd accept Merumeci's conditions, Mamma," said Carla. "As far as I'm concerned, I can't wait to get out of this house and go somewhere else, even if I have to be poor."

Her mother made an exasperated gesture. "You shut up."

A dismayed silence followed. Mariagrazia was looking at poverty; Carla was looking at the destruction of her old life; Michele was looking at nothing at all, and was the most desperate of the three.

"At any rate," added Leo, "we can talk about it again later. Come to my office the day after tomorrow, Signora. That way we can discuss it more fully."

The mother agreed with a sort of avid and painful enthusiasm. "The day after tomorrow . . . the day after tomorrow in the afternoon?"

"In the afternoon."

For a moment none of them spoke; then, at Mariagrazia's invitation, all four walked out of the living room and into the dining room.

The table had been set tastefully and festively; silver, crystal, and all the family's best china gleamed and sparkled on the white tablecloth, in the white daylight of the dining room. Mariagrazia sat down at the head of the table, and although the places were set as they had been the evening before, she rearranged them: "Merumeci, here, Carla, there . . . you here, Michele." It was not quite clear if she was doing this to emphasize the importance of the day or simply in memory of previous occasions, when there had been more guests.

"I would have liked," she said, beginning to eat, "to make a dinner for Carla's birthday the way *I* think of dinner, all specialties and delicacies, a *proper* dinner, that is . . . but how could I? These days that's not possible . . . my cook isn't bad but you can't say she's good. I have to tell her everything — 'do it this way, do it that way' — but the passion is lacking. Now, when the passion's not there, everything's lacking."

"You're right," agreed Michele, with ironic gravity, "that's just how it is. Without passion, you can't do anything . . . for instance, no matter how hard I tried to slap Leo, I couldn't. The passion just wasn't there for me."

"What's that got to do with it?" interrupted his mother, flushing with vexation. "What's Leo got to do with it? We were talking about the cook. Oh, Michele, you're always so *like* yourself. . . . Even on a day like today, the day your sister was born, when we should forget everything and sincerely rejoice, you talk about slapping people and quarreling. Won't you ever mend your ways?"

"Let him say what he wants, Signora," profferred Leo without lifting his eyes from his plate. "It's makes no difference to me. I don't even hear it."

"I'll be quiet, Mother, I'll be quiet," exclaimed Michele, who had realized just in time that he had struck the wrong note. "Don't worry . . . I'll be as quiet as a fish, I won't disturb the party anymore."

There was another silence. The maid came in and took away their plates. Then the mother, who had not stopped staring at her lover with searching eyes, turned to him and asked, "Did you have fun last night, Merumeci?"

Leo glanced over at Carla as if to say, "Here we go," but Carla made no sign in answer. She heard the man ask, "Where? When?" and at the same moment felt a foot press her own under the table. She bit her lips; this petty duplicity gave her a sense of great darkness; she wanted to stand up and shout out the truth.

"Where?" said the mother. "With Lisa. Good God!"

"Well . . . if you find something fun about driving someone home."

"Not me," protested Mariagrazia, with a malicious laugh. "Frankly, I get bored in certain company. But you, now, you seek out that kind of company. It must mean that you like it."

Leo was about to respond when, with his usual bad timing, Michele intervened. "Oh, Mother," he exclaimed, parodying Mariagrazia's own words a moment earlier, "you're always so *like* yourself! Even on a day like today, the day your sister was born, no, excuse me, your daughter, when we should forget everything and sincerely rejoice, you talk about Lisa and driving people home. Won't you ever mend your ways?"

This bit of burlesque made Carla smile in spite of herself and Leo laugh out loud. "Great, Michele!" he shouted; but the mother was offended. "What's this got to do with you?" she asked, turning to her son. "I can say what I want to Merumeci without you having to stick your nose into it."

"But on a day like today?"

"What's that got to do with it?" She shrugged her shoulders fu-

riously. "I was only mentioning . . . anyway," she added, "let's go ahead and talk about something else. However, you, Merumeci, should be warned that from now on you'll have to choose some other place to meet your lovers. . . . I'm not running a brothel here. Do you understand?"

It was the first time that Mariagrazia had ever abandoned herself to such violent accusations, and it had an unexpected result. Carla, who had never said anything during these scenes, spoke up in protest. "I'd like to know something," she began; she struggled to keep her words and her tone of voice calm, but the tension in her young face, a certain flush in her cheeks, and an unusual hardness in her eyes revealed how deeply angered she was. "I'd like to know, Mamma, whether you're aware of the things you're saying . . . I'd just like to know that."

Her mother looked at her as if she were a living wonder. "Oh, this is a new one! Now I'm not even free to talk!"

"I'd like to know," insisted Carla, and her voice was already higher — it shook, and her lips were trembling — "if all this should be allowed. . . ." She lowered her large head and stared strangely into her mother's eyes from under her lashes.

For a moment there was silence, while the three of them gazed into each other's faces, surprised and confused. Perhaps only Leo had, at that point, at least a vague perception of Carla's state of mind. In order to look at her mother more closely she was sitting slightly sideways to the table, almost crouched in the high-backed chair; her thin shoulders seemed even narrower, her head larger; she looked like she was getting ready to pounce.

"What a little fury," thought Leo, watching her. "Now she's going to launch herself at Mariagrazia and rip open her face with her nails."

But these expectations of catastrophe were not borne out; Carla only raised her head. "This is what I want to know," she repeated, "and whether it's possible to go on like this, every day, in this tedium, and never change and never let go of these troubles, and congratulate ourselves on all the stupidities that pass through our heads, and always quarrel and fight for the same old reasons

and never rise up off the earth, not even this much" — she raised the palm of her hand from the table and shuddered; her eyes filled with tears — "and now," she added, suddenly straightening up, "I'd like to know if you think all this is good. . . . You don't realize it, but you should see yourself in a mirror when you're talking, when you're quarreling . . . then you'd be ashamed of yourself and understand the point of boredom and weariness a person can come to and how much someone might want a new life, completely different from this one. . . ." She stopped speaking, but her face was still flushed and tearful; without even knowing what she was doing, she served herself from the platter the maid was offering her.

At last her mother recovered from her surprise. "Oh, great! This beats everything!" she cried. "So from today on I'll have to apply to my daughter for permission to speak? I heard you but I thought I was dreaming. This really beats all!"

"It seems to me," said Michele mildly, "that Carla has only barely touched on the truth. All this is more than boring, it's disgusting . . . but struggling against it is useless, better to get used to it."

"Let's not exaggerate," said Leo conciliatorily. "Carla didn't mean to say all that."

"Come off it!" answered his lover. "I know my own chicks! Do you know what both Carla and Michele are? Egoists . . . that's the truth . . . such egoists that if they could do it, they'd both go away and leave me alone." Her voice and lips trembled. Everyone would go away, Leo and the others; she would truly be left alone.

Carla watched her and was sorry now that she had spoken; especially because what good could it do? You can't drain the sea with a cup. Her mother would go on just as she was, steeped in incomprehension, ridiculous, lost in the dark; not even a miracle could change her. There was nothing to be gained by clashing with her — better to take action. "To actually go away," she thought, looking at Leo's placid red face, "this very day, now, and never, ever come back"; but suppressing her disgust, she steeled herself to a reconciliation. "Look, Mamma, I didn't mean to

offend you," she said docilely, "only to ask you, since today is my birthday, as you said yourself, if you could keep from arguing about anything and . . . and . . ."

"And rejoice together sincerely," finished Michele, with a grimace.

"Exactly," agreed Carla seriously. "Rejoice." But looking at her mother's stupid, dissatisfied, uncertain face, she wanted to scream, "Rejoice over what? Over being the way we are?" She was silent a moment. "So, Mamma," she said, "you're not really offended, are you?"

"I don't ever get offended," replied her mother with dignity. "It's just that I don't think that's the way a respectful daughter should speak to her mother."

"You're so right, Mamma," agreed Carla, ever more docile, "so very right. But now we should forget everything, at least for today, and think about happier subjects."

"You're clever, you," said her mother with a half-smile. "So be it, let's forget it, just because it's your birthday . . . if not, things would have gone otherwise."

"Wonderful," approved Carla, without deviating from her tone of self-willed serenity. "Thank you, Mamma. And now you two, Leo and Michele, tell us something gay or funny so we can laugh."

"Right off the cuff," said Leo, laying down his fork, "I really can't think of anything to tell."

"I," said Michele, "know a really great story. Do you want me to tell it to you?"

"Let's hear it," encouraged his mother.

"All right, here goes." Michele raised his head and began to recite: "It was the night of Good Friday, the Calabrian brigands were sitting around the fire, and one of them said: 'You, Beppe, you know so many, tell us a story,' and Beppe began, in a cavernous voice, 'It was the night of Good Friday, the Calabrian brigands were sitting around the fire, and one of them said, 'You, Beppe, you know so many, tell us a story,' and Beppe began, in a cavernous voice, 'It was the night of Good Friday . . ."

"Enough, enough already," interrupted his mother, laughing. "For heaven's sake, it never ends . . . we get it."

"The serpent that bites his own tail," said Leo sententiously.

The maid came in with a marvelous cake; it had *Auguri!* (Best Wishes!) written on it in letters of creamy icing. Mariagrazia served herself first, then Leo, then Carla, and finally Michele.

"So, didn't you like my story?" he asked.

"No, I didn't," replied his mother, who was eating daintily. "Anything stupider than that . . ."

"Is that what you learn at the university?" inquired Leo mildly, without lifting his eyes from the plate.

Michele looked at him sidelong without answering. "I have another story," he said to his mother, "but I don't think you'd like this one very much, either. . . . It's about a middle-aged woman who had a lover."

"But that's not a happy story," Carla objected quickly, looking at her brother with great attention, "and what I wanted was stories to make us all laugh."

"It depends," observed Leo. "It could be happy or unhappy."

"Besides, Michele," said the mother with dignity, "I don't like you to talk about things like that so freely in front of Carla."

At these words Leo had to suppress a smile. "Oh, come off it," he thought, highly amused, "Carla knows more than you do." He sought the girl's foot under the table and pressed it with his own as if to invite her to laugh with him; but as before, she refused to respond to this confidential and complicit contact. Her desire to laugh had deserted her; she gazed at her mother's face, that stupid and uncertain mask suspended in the white daylight of the dining room. "To be done with all this as soon as I can," she thought, "to do it in such a way that tomorrow she won't be able to talk like this anymore." In her impatience, she felt like making some suggestive gesture or bursting out in ironic laughter, so that her mother would harbor no more illusions about her innocence.

"What a shame," Michele was saying in the meantime. "It was a very instructive story. Maybe not funny . . . but instructive."

There was another silence; the maid changed their plates and brought in the fruit.

"So, Carla," said Leo, peeling an apple with great care, "a new life should start up for you today, isn't that right?"

"Let's hope so," said Carla, with a small sigh. A single thought was tormenting her: when would she give herself to Leo, tonight or some other day?

"New in what way?" asked her mother.

"New in every way, Mamma."

"I don't understand you, my dear," said Mariagrazia. "Explain yourself, give me an example."

"New . . . that is, less stupid, less superficial, less useless, more profound . . . than the way I am now." The girl looked at her. "New in the sense of changing completely."

"Carla's right," agreed Leo. "Every once in a while it's good to change."

"You shut up," retorted the mother uneasily. "I don't understand. What do you mean by changing your life? One fine morning you wake up and say: 'Today I want to change my life.' How is that possible?"

"You can always take some kind of action," said Carla, without raising her eyes, and clenching her teeth in rage, "that utterly and completely transforms your mode of existence."

"But, my dear," replied her mother harshly, "I don't see how a respectable young lady can change her life without getting married. Then, certainly, life changes . . . you have the responsibilites of a house, you have to take care of your husband . . . and then educate your children, if you have them . . . a whole complex of things that radically changes your habits. Now, I wish that for you with all my heart, but it seems improbable to me that you should get married between today and tomorrow. And so I can't see how your life, suddenly and just because you want it to, could change."

"But Mamma," risked Carla, nervously gripping the handle of the knife she was holding, "there are other things besides marriage that can bring about changes in a person's life."

"Such as?" inquired Mariagrazia very coldly, cutting a slice of her apple.

Carla stared at her, almost with hatred. "Such as becoming Leo's lover," she wanted to answer; and she imagined with a sad, avid pleasure the astonishment, indignation, and fear that those words would evoke. But she restrained herself, saying only, in a resigned and ironic tone of voice, "For example, if today I ran into an American movie producer." She went on in a disheartened way, "And he, struck by my beauty, proposed that I become an actress. . . . Well, then my life would change right away. . . ."

Her mother made a face. "You reason like a child, it's no use talking to you."

"Anything's possible," said Leo, who was anxious to stay in Carla's good graces.

"What?" cried his lover. "That today my daughter could become an actress? You, Merumeci, don't know what you're talking about."

"But leaving jokes aside," Carla insisted, "it looks like we'll have to move out of the house and go somewhere else to live very shortly. And we'll have to try to spend less. . . . So won't our life change whether we want it to or not?"

"Who said we're moving out?" retorted Mariagrazia, with a kind of desperate insolence, looking into her lover's eyes. "Until you find a husband, we're staying here."

Leo looked back at her and flushed red with anger, barely repressing a violent shrug of his shoulders. "Like hell you'll stay here!" he wanted to shout at her. "You'll be out of here, you'll be out of here in a flash!"

"We'll stay here," repeated the mother with an insecure smile. "Isn't it true, Merumeci, that we'll stay here?"

They all looked at the man. "The devil take her," he thought; but he answered, "Yes, yes, you'll stay here," wanting above all not to provoke a scene and ruin things with Carla.

"You see!" cried the mother triumphantly. "I have Merumeci's word on it! For now nothing will change!"

"Not for about an hour," murmured the man, but in a low voice so that no one could hear him.

Right then Carla gave in to her second irrepressible outburst. The other three saw her face flush dark red, and suddenly she banged her fist on the table. "I don't believe any of this!" she cried loudly, in a voice so high it was almost shrill. "Mamma, you want to see me suffocate! But I prefer ruin! Yes, do you hear me? Ruin! All this is so awful I'd rather sink down, down to the very bottom, I was telling Leo just the other day that I don't think about anything else, day or night, and even this morning, as soon as I woke up and looked in the mirror, I said to myself, 'This new year that's beginning for me has to be absolutely different from the past one, because it's impossible to go on like this. . . . It's impossible!"

Her flush turned abruptly to pallor, and she lowered her head and began to weep. The others all looked at each other in embarrassment. Then her mother stood up — those tears must have been so obviously sincere to her that the preceding accusations were stripped of importance — and approached the girl. "Now, what reason is there to cry," she said, "just like that, for no reason . . . come on, today's your birthday . . . you shouldn't be crying. . . ."

Carla kept her head lowered and sobs continued to shake her; but in her mother's blandly soothing words there was such a limpid echo of her infancy, with its childish sorrows and maternal comforts, that a reluctant emotion crept into her arid pain; she seemed to look back at the small girl she had been, and a sudden regret pierced her heart for having lost that innocence and irresponsibility. Figures and events rose out of those years to pass before her eyes, across their veil of tears; it was only an instant; then she heard Leo encouraging her in turn: "Come on . . . cheer up . . . why cry?" And she lifted her head.

"You're right," she said firmly, drying her eyes. "Today is my birthday." She wanted to add something else, but restrained herself.

"Really!" Leo was exclaiming. "Crying at the table."

Mariagrazia smiled stupidly; everything was bitter and sweet at the same moment.

Only Michele neither moved nor spoke. "Hysterics," he had thought when he saw his sister burst into tears. "If some young

man of her own age loved her and she loved him, she'd be calm and happy." He saw no difference between his sister and the other two; all three of them seemed intolerably false and distant to him. He looked at them. "Is it really possible," he asked himself, anguished, "that this, only this, is my world, that these are my people?" The longer he listened to them, the more ridiculous and incomprehensible they appeared to him in their alien sincerities. "Laugh," he thought, "I need to laugh about it." But from disgust or from pity? He wasn't sure which. Seeing them there, sitting around that table for the thousandth time — Leo, his mother, Carla — so unalterable yet so flawed, his face darkened, his eyes closed in exhaustion. "There's some mistake," he said to himself, "there must be some mistake." And he lowered his head to hide his wet eyelids.

No one saw; no one understood. The fruit had been eaten, and everyone had a wineglass in front of their plate. Leo looked attentively at the labels of the two bottles of French champagne that the maid had just brought in. "This one is good," he said finally, like a true connoisseur, "and this one is excellent."

"That one first, then," said the mother judiciously, "and the other one after. Merumeci, you uncork them."

Leo took up a bottle and freed it from its wire. "One, two, three," he counted theatrically; at "three" the cork exploded, and swiftly, so as not to spill the foam, Leo poured the champagne into their glasses. They all stood up beneath the dusty chandelier.

"To your health, Carla," said her mother, in a low, intimate voice as if they were dealing with some secret. The glasses bumped together; affectionate, somewhat pathetic cries crossed paths in every direction — "Mamma," "Michele," "Carla," "Signora," "Merumeci" — and above the disordered table, among those four bent heads, the crystal of the goblets tinkled, clinking sorrowfully with every toast. Then they all drank, looking at each other tentatively over their champagne.

"It's good," said Mariagrazia at last. "You can tell it's old."

"It's excellent," confirmed Leo. "And now," he added, "I shall make a speech . . . a speech for each of you; but first of all, I'd like

to ask Michele to stop looking like someone under a death sentence. It's not hemlock, it's champagne."

"You're right," thought Michele, "I should be laughing." And he made a grimace so stupid that he realized it and smiled.

"That's better," said Leo, very pleased by his allusion to Socrates. He lifted his goblet. "To your new life, Carla." He smiled, then brought the glass to bump against hers. "I know very well," he went on, looking at her mischievously, "what your great desires are, and what you think about day and night. So I believe I'm hitting the nail right on the head by wishing you a happy marriage in all ways, that is, to a rich, handsome, and intelligent man. Did I guess right or not?"

Her mother smiled festively from behind her own wineglass and nodded her head in agreement, but the object of the toast neither smiled nor replied. The man's suggestive, ironic duplicity gave her a glimpse of the ruin she was rushing to embrace; still, she must let herself fall until she hit bottom, the bottom of her life. Her eyes flashed him a cold assent and, not without a certain disgust, since she had never liked French champagne, she downed her glass to the last drop.

"To the health of the Signora," continued Leo, "and since, from what I can gather, this is her desire, let us heartily wish her, in contrast to Carla, that nothing will ever change, that everything will remain exactly as it is, with her old ways and also," he added, with brilliant dexterity, "her old friends." He saw her smile as if he had tickled her under the armpits. "*Evviva!* Here's to old friends!" she cried desperately, then leaned forward to clink her glass against her lover's and drank with enthusiasm.

"To our friendship, Michele," said Leo finally. He knocked back his champagne in one great swallow, approached the boy, and held out his hand. Michele looked up at the man, who was smiling good-naturedly, sure of himself, and looked at that open hand right under his nose. He was sitting down and Leo was standing, so that the boy could see his broad chest and, above it, that rosy, paternal smile snaking stupidly between the heavy cheeks. "Refuse," he thought, "refuse and laugh in his face," and he started to get up,

dropping his napkin on the table. Then, looking around, he became aware that a profound silence had followed on the heels of the laughter, the words, and the toasts. The chandelier, the china scattered across the table were not more immobile than Carla and his mother, who was looking at him with her head in her hands, anxious and imperious. Two deep lines furrowed her forehead, and it was hard to tell whether she was pleading or commanding.

He was gripped once more by the malaise of compassion. "Don't be afraid," he wished he could say, "no one will touch your man, Mamma, no one will take him away from you." His eyes glazed over, fixed on some point between Leo and his mother, lost themselves in the dazzling white light. . . . It was a dream, a nightmare of indifference.

"Come on, come on," he heard Leo saying, "Give me your hand and let's make up." Michele held out his right hand and Leo grasped it; then, immediately, and with a spontaneity that seemed incredible to him, he found himself in the man's arms; they hugged and kissed each other.

Immediately a great gaiety filled the room. "That's better!" applauded his mother. "Bravo, Michele!"

"It's not right," Leo cried loudly and happily, "that there should be serious disagreements between two upright people like Michele and me." He was thinking to himself, "So now that we've hugged, will you leave me in peace?"

Only the boy at the end of the table, hanging his head over his plate, seemed to feel ashamed, to repent of that embrace as if of an evil deed. At last he raised his eyes: now those three, having overcome the obstacle of his hatred, were no longer thinking about him at all. Gathered together around the head of the table, they seemed unknown to him, distant, as if he were seeing them through a thickness of glass. They were laughing and drinking . . . ignoring him.

Leo had picked the bottle back up and was pouring champagne for both women, giving most to the daughter. "If I don't make Carla drink at least one of these two bottles," he thought, "then my name's not Leo." He knew that drunkenness would

facilitate his seduction; already he was imagining the delights of their future encounter in the garden, and, whether it was due to the abundant dinner or something else, a swollen lust was worming its way through his body. "Now bear well in mind," he said severely, lifting his goblet, "that we can't leave the table until these two bottles are finished."

"Drink them yourself," said Mariagrazia, who was laughing hard and launching pathetic, inflamed glances at her lover between bursts of laughter. "You or Carla drink them . . . I really can't."

"You're absolutely right," agreed Leo. "Carla and I will drink them . . . right, Carla?" And he raised his glass.

The girl looked at him. She didn't like that champagne; actually, it disgusted her, but there was an irresistible and menacing imperiousness in her lover's gesture and in the glance that accompanied it that made her obey his suggestion against her own will. "All of it," he warned her, "down to the last drop." Her mother laughed.

Carla stared at Leo, and then at Mariagrazia. "To get drunk," she thought feverishly, suddenly terrified. Those faces, right there, in the white light of the afternoon, frightened her; they were the mean, petty, uncomprehending faces of her life. "Not to see any of this anymore." With disgust she lifted her glass and drank until it was empty. The sweetish, bubbling liquid, with its abhorrent taste, filled her mouth. She swallowed it immediately and for an instant thought of spitting it back out into the face of her lover, but she restrained herself and closed her eyes, listening to the satisfied gurgling in her nauseated throat; then she reopened her eyes to see the bottle tilting once more over her wineglass, Leo's hand pouring it out, a flood of yellow champagne filling the glass to the brim.

Leo was speaking to her mother. "You should drink, too," he exhorted her. "You know the old saying: 'Fill up the empty glass, empty the full glass — don't ever leave it empty, and don't ever leave it full.'"

"Oh, oh," laughed her mother, cheered by these stale witticisms.

"*In vino veritas*," Leo continued. "Drink with me! I'm sure that you're already gone after the second glass."

Mariagrazia was insulted. "You are so wrong," she said with dignity. "There are very few people who can hold their wine as well as I can." And to prove her capacity, she emptied her glass.

"We'll see," bantered Leo, who was by now in a wonderful mood. "How many are there?" He held up two fingers.

"There are twenty," answered his lover, bursting into laughter.

"Excellent." For a moment the man said nothing; he was looking at the two women, mother and daughter. "And now," he continued, turning suddenly to Carla, "Let's drink . . . let's drink to the health of your future husband."

"Wonderful!" exclaimed her mother happily. "I'll drink to that, too!"

Carla hesitated; she was already high enough that her vision was distorted, as if she were wearing glasses that were too strong or looking into an aquarium; objects wavered, merged, and fused together. "One more glass," she thought, "and I won't understand anything anymore." She smiled confusedly, lifted up the disgusting goblet, and drank; immediately she seemed to experience a great jolt upward into the skies of drunkenness and was seized by merriment and the need to talk and show the others that she was completely conscious. "I don't mind drinking to the health of my future husband," she said, enunciating each syllable carefully, "but who is this husband going to be?"

"Only God knows," said her mother.

"If I didn't think of you as a daughter by now," began Leo, "I'd suggest my own self as your husband. Would you want me?"

"You!" she shouted, pointing a finger at him. "You, my husband . . . but . . ." She stared at him for an instant: wasn't that her mother's lover? "But you're too *big*, Leo."

"Oh, if that's all," protested her mother, offended. "He's not too big. I only hope you can find a husband like him."

"So, would you accept me, Carla?" insisted Leo, with a smile. "We could go to Paris for our honeymoon."

"No . . . I'd rather go to India," interrupted the girl in a plaintive tone.

"Paris is a lot more interesting," said her mother, who had never been there.

"Forget India," Leo conceded. "I'd give you a car, a house, dresses . . . so, would you marry me?"

Carla looked at him; drunkenness was confusing her thinking; why was Leo talking that way? To make fun of her mother? But in that case, she should laugh. "As far as I'm concerned," she finally replied uncertainly, "I have nothing against it . . . but we'd have to ask Mamma's permission."

"And you, Signora," inquired Leo, still with that tranquil, self-satisfied smile, "would you accept me as your son-in-law?"

"Let's see," said Mariagrazia easily; in part because of the wine, in part because of her excitement, all this seemed very funny to her. "Let's see, now . . . do you have a good position?"

"I'm employed at the Ministry of Grace and Justice," replied Leo humbly. "I earn eight hundred lire a month . . . but my superiors like me, and they've promised me a promotion. . . ."

"And your family?" asked the mother, making an effort to keep from laughing.

"I don't have any living family, I'm alone in the world."

"Religious?"

"Religious in the extreme."

"All in all, do you think," concluded Mariagrazia, "that you could make my daughter happy?"

"I'm convinced of it," said Leo, looking at Carla intently.

"Then marry each other and God bless you!" cried her mother, breaking out into laughter.

"Let's get married, Leo," said Carla joylessly.

And Leo laughed, too. "I think the dress rehearsal's gone well," he said. "Now there's nothing left to do except wait for the real husband."

He picked up the second bottle and filled Carla's glass once

again. "I need to make her drink," he repeated to himself, "drink like a sponge." He glanced at her. "A little toast to the health of the Signora," he proposed. Carla lifted the goblet with a trembling hand and drank; then, so suddenly that she was frightened, she realized that she was drunk: her head was spinning, her throat was dry, and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't manage to focus her eyes properly. From that moment on, one could truthfully say that she lost precise awareness of what she was doing. She could no longer see or hear clearly, and the glass and silver objects on the table were so dazzling and strangely defined that they hurt her eyes, the faces of her companions so motionless and hard that they seemed to be masks. But every once in a while a shuddering wave rolled through this reality, so that outlines turned foggy, eyes and mouths spread like stains on the clay of the faces, brilliant flashes like lightning tore open the air. And the same was true of her hearing: she could grasp entire words, but no matter which way she turned them, she was unable to penetrate the secret of their meanings. "And now that I'm drunk," she asked herself, "how'm I sposed to talk to Leo in the garden?" She became obsessed by this fear and bitterly regretted having drunk; she felt like weeping.

But it was important to Leo that she keep on drinking; so, as he conversed with her mother, he pretended not be thinking or even looking at the girl, but in the middle of some anecdote he would turn, with a cheerful face and bottle in hand, and pour champagne into her glass. "Come on, Carla," he would say, "you can do it," meanwhile lifting his own glass. Carla stared at him. "Why?" she wanted to ask. Leo's expressionless face on the far side of that hand holding the bottle, his gestures and words — all felt laden with a cruel, incomprehensible, and automatic fate, as if the man had been a mechanical dummy placed there to pour wine every five minutes out of that bottle into her glass. However, she didn't protest; she overcame her disgust and drank, then put down the empty goblet and gazed at it with fearful, drowning eyes; soon, she thought, the thick neck of the bottle would reappear and pitilessly pour out a new flood of champagne.

Finally the second bottle was finished. "We drank it all," said Leo cheerfully. "Brava, Carla." The girl didn't answer; she kept her head lowered, her hair hanging over her eyes. "Hey," prompted the man, "what's the matter with you? Do you feel a little dazed, maybe? Here," he suggested, holding out his cigarette case, "have a cigarette." Watching her light one and smoke it with difficulty, he thought, "The only thing missing is a rose on her breast, that's all, and you could take her for one of those sluts that hang out in the nightclubs." And it was true: just like those women left in the dance halls in the early morning, Carla was leaning on her elbow on the table, resting her tousled head on her hand and staring into space, with that cigarette hanging from the corner of her mouth; her dress, which had belonged to her mother and so was too loose and too sophisticated for her, had slipped down over one shoulder to reveal the first, white swelling of her breasts. She felt overcome by nausea; she put her head down on the table and thought she would die.

Mariagrazia looked at her without disapproval. "Go out into the garden," she advised, "go get a breath of fresh air, it will do you good." These words inspired in Carla, despite her drunkenness, a sharp sense of sarcasm. "What will do me good?" she wanted to reply. "To meet up with Leo? Sure, that will do me good, sure it will. . . ." But instead she said, "Are you sure?" and stood up.

Immediately she realized how hard it was going to be not to fall down. The whole room wavered and trembled, the floor rose and fell beneath her feet like the deck of a ship, the walls were oscillating, that painting that had been vertical was now horizontal, that chair was about to fall on her, the table with those three people sitting at it seemed like it might touch the ceiling any minute. Someone was looking at her from way down there at the head of the table, staring at her with blank and vacant eyes, leaning his head on his hands: was it Michele? she didn't have time to figure it out; she staggered out of the room and disappeared into the shadows of the hallway.

"She's not used to wine," said her mother, who had followed her with her eyes.

"True," answered the man. "Only men like me who have been in the war and drunk the grappa they make down there know what real drunkenness is." He picked up the bottle and poured the few remaining drops into Carla's wineglass. "To our friendship, Michele!" he cried, turning toward the boy.

But Michele neither spoke nor drank nor responded to the toast. He hung his head; a hateful disgust mixed with resentment, regret, and humiliation oppressed him; he looked back on himself being hugged by Leo, with his nose buried in the man's shoulder, his arms hanging down, moved, yes, almost moved in his sentimental, *sentimental* heart. He suffered again the kiss he had received, and yes, also *given* . . . oh, what a fine moment! And he felt that his ears were being deafened by the din of formidable outbursts of laughter; made fun of and happy about it; exactly; Leo had triumphed, had taken his money and mother; and he, instead, was left with empty hands, all for the price of a toast, of a hug — all stuff without substance.

The two bottles were empty and the lit cigarettes were going up in smoke.

A peaceful white light shone through the curtains of the window.

Obsessed by her jealousy, his mother immediately started back up the old quarrel. "Why don't you drink to the health of your distant girlfriend," she asked in an obstinate voice, and then added, in a very botched accent, "*Loin de toi, loin de ton coeur.*"

Leaning back in his chair, Leo made no response, only looked at her with inexpressive eyes. He was weighed down by digestion, and in the heavy and sated silence he opened his mouth and yawned. Just then they heard the radiator pipes start up with a sonorous *broon . . . broon;* someone down in the basement had stirred up the fire in the main furnace.

7

FROM THE HALLWAY Carla passed into the vestibule. There was the curtain behind which she had hidden with Leo the evening before; everything was wavering around her; she grabbed the curtain so as not to fall down, then walked out, stumbling down the marble steps of the stairway.

A mortal calm hung over the garden. Beyond the trunks and bare branches of the trees, she could see, far away, the sad, yellowish garden wall, stained with great humid splotches. There was neither shadow nor light, and there was no wind; the air was cold and still and the sky was gray; a flock of crows was flying overhead at a great height, now scattering apart, now gathering together, dipping gently in that immensity into the distance. From some secret hiding place a bird whistled its one thin note and it was as if all nature had shivered.

Step by step, steadying herself against the wall, she circled the house. She looked up toward the closed window of the dining room: what were the three of them doing? Were they still sitting around the table drinking? Or were they arguing? She picked up a pebble and tossed it, picked a flower, and performed many other

small actions to demonstrate to herself that she was not drunk; but at a certain distance things tended to merge, the trees writhed like serpents, and everything blurred. Also, it was useless to try to hide it from herself, her legs weren't supporting her very well; she had the impression that with every step the earth was rolling beneath her like waves, slipping out from under her feet.

Behind the house the garden was smaller but thicker; huge trees had sprung up from the ground and the luxuriant shrubs were as tall as a man's chest. Only one narrow path wound around this mass of untamed vegetation, running alongside the garden wall, but even it was so abandoned and invaded by grasses and branches that at certain points it was difficult to discover the old track. There also must still be, down at the bottom of the garden, a small, rectangular structure — a kind of shed or garage — but from where Carla was standing she couldn't see it; it was hidden by the trees.

A bench painted green had been set there, to lean against the wall of the house. Carla sat down and held her head in her hands. She felt a sickness the likes of which she had never experienced come over her, and her drunkenness, instead of diminishing, grew even greater; the first sensations of lightness and ease had now yielded to a dazed nausea, and that vague rising and falling of things was becoming unbearable. "Isn't there any way," she thought in her anguish, gazing down at the white, swarming gravel, "to make this torture stop?" No answer. Overwhelmed by this contrast between her own delirium and the quiet calm of nature, and feeling a vague desire to abandon herself, annihilate herself in this motionlessness of things, Carla closed her eyes. She didn't sleep, she didn't think; she stayed like that, with her lids shut tight, for about ten minutes; then she felt a hand touch her on the shoulder; she opened her eyes and saw Leo.

He was carrying his hat and his overcoat was slung over his arm; a cigarette was in his mouth. "What's the matter? What are you doing like that?" he asked.

The girl raised her head and said simply, "I feel sick."

"Sick? Sick?" repeated Leo, with smiling impatience. "You

just need to get up and walk around . . . besides, you're not sick, you just drank a little too much."

She stood up weakly, but right away she had to grab him and cling to him. "Hold me up," she pleaded, "everything's spinning around me." She looked up into her lover's face, then hung her head back down and gave a long sigh.

They took a few steps together, moving forward under the vault of branches onto the close, damp path alongside the garden wall. Every once in a while Leo would ask her, "Do you feel any better?" and she would answer, "No."

"Do you feel any better?"

"No."

The trees and plants entwined above them were no more motionless than the gray sky that could be glimpsed between their branches; a thick layer of black, soaked leaves deadened their footsteps; the silence was profound, with not a single sound.

"Do you feel any better, darling?" asked Leo again. Excited and filled with desire, he was awaiting the opportune moment to embrace his companion. Her body leaned languidly on his arm, her rounded hip was pressed against his, and these contacts roused in him a burning lust. "I have to calm down," he thought. "In a moment I'll take her into the shed and do whatever I want with her . . . it just takes a little patience. . . ."

Carla's eyes were wandering over the narrow space of the pathway, which was full of branches and shadows. "Why did you make me drink?" she complained at last.

"Why did you drink?" retorted Leo. Questions, always questions. They stopped.

"I drank," she said volubly, "so I wouldn't see Mamma and you . . . and not even Michele . . . so I wouldn't see anyone anymore." She lowered her eyes and shook her head. "But if I'd known I'd get this sick, I wouldn't have done it."

"Don't be a fool!" shouted the man, so loudly that he surprised even himself. "You drank because that's what you wanted to do!" He saw her smile mysteriously. "And do you, by any chance, believe that I love you?" she asked, in a confidential tone of voice.

They stared at each other — Carla seriously, with the slight madness of inebriation still shining in her eyes; and Leo, caught between irony and excitement, with a gaze full of turmoil. Then, suddenly, he lowered his arms and grabbed the girl roughly around her hips; she burst out into strident laughter and wrestled with him, working her legs and shoulders, making drunken, almost obscene movements. "Leo! Oh, Leo!" she cried, between sobs of laughter. "Leo, don't look at me like that . . . no, let me go!" The low vault of the trees smothered her shrill voice, and at intervals she saw, through her struggles, the man's florid face, suffused with malicious, almost senile lust, approach hers; and even she didn't know why she was struggling. At last he subdued her contortions and squeezed her in his arms and pressed her against him; for an instant he gazed into her terrified eyes, her white face, her half-open mouth. Then he leaned down and kissed her.

They broke apart and walked forward, a little unsteadily, into the shadow beneath the dead tangle of plants and trees; but suddenly Carla stopped doubtfully and squeezed her companion's arm nervously. "Leo," she murmured, raising a childish finger in warning, "Leo, we shouldn't . . . we shouldn't." Then she fell silent and stood motionless and distracted, gazing at something in the shadows of the pathway, and behind their veil of tears her eyes changed expression strangely.

"Well?" asked the man; but Carla appeared to be fascinated by a stone, as round and white as an egg, half-buried in the black leaf mold of the soil; the power of speech seemed to have deserted her. That phrase, "we shouldn't," had issued almost unconsciously out of her mouth; but now the feelings that had inspired it had vanished; darkness had returned.

"Come on, tell me," Leo encouraged her. "What shouldn't we do? We shouldn't drink? Well, I know . . . but now," he added, pushing her forward, "walk. Walk a little more."

They had arrived at the bottom of the garden, where the path formed a kind of bay around the shed leaning against the garden wall; its own wall was hidden completely by climbing plants and only the door, hanging askew from its rusty hinges, was visible.

"Ah . . . what's this?" asked Leo, pretending surprise.

"The gardener's house."

"The gardener's house? Interesting . . . and *is* there a gardener?"

"No."

"The gardener's house . . . ," repeated Leo, as if the words were extraordinarily pleasing to him because of some hidden significance, "let's go, let's go see it."

Carla laughed — all this seemed absurd to her — but she obeyed. Pushed aside, the open door revealed a single room with a low ceiling and a dusty wooden floor, bare walls, and a little iron cot with a gray mattress, worn through here and there to show its wool stuffing, which took up one whole corner. In the opposite corner, like the tripod of some abandoned rite, a rusty basin squatted on its support; there was nothing else in the room. Carla contemplated these poor objects in a daze; by now her nausea had become unbearable, and she would have liked to go back to the house and lie down on the couch in her bedroom; but, overwhelmed by drunkenness, she felt her knees fold and she sat down on the bed.

"Why?" she asked miserably. "Why did you make me drink?" She stared down at the floorboards; some hanks of hair hung down in front of her eyes; a vague sickness filled her mouth with saliva. Leo sat down next to her. "This is the right moment," he thought in excitement, and he put his arm around the girl's waist. "Now, look," he said, in a dulcet voice, "be reasonable, it was you that drank, out of your own spontaneous desire." Carla shook her head but said nothing. "And besides," added the man, "what does it matter?" He slipped the dress down her arm and respectfully kissed her bare shoulder. "This will all pass."

He couldn't tear his eyes away from that bit of naked breast the loose dress allowed him to glimpse; he grabbed her roughly and pushed her down on the bed, running his hands over her body. Struggles; creakings from the cot; futile contortions. "Let go of me," she murmured at last, ceasing all movement, exhausted by her efforts and by an unfamiliar languor. But from the low ceiling,

at which she was staring with wide-open, suffering eyes, she suddenly saw Leo's red face plummeting down like a meteor; his kiss landed on her neck, slid across her cheek, and reached her lips; Carla closed her eyes, resting her head on one shoulder; the soft, moist contact of the man's mouth roused nothing in her; she wished she could go to sleep. But the sound of popped buttons rolling across the floor, along with certain jolts to her back, made her come to; she reopened her eyes and saw an inflamed and lustful face bent over hers; she realized that her shoulders were naked and she began to struggle, futilely grabbing the edges of her dress as if they were the edges of a precipice; two violent tugs almost broke her fingernails. With a fussy delicacy that contrasted strangely with the congested excitement in his face, Leo lifted the girl up from the bed for a moment and, not without difficulty, lowered her dress to the waist; then he threw himself back on her breast and began, with nimble fingers, to slide her naked arms out of the slender shoulder straps of her slip. Frightened, Carla watched him, and every time she tried to struggle, she saw him make the gestures of a surgeon in the midst of an operation: he would arch his eyebrows, shake his head, and purse his mouth as if to say, "No, dear . . . don't get upset . . . it's nothing . . . leave it to me." This imperious mimicry, and the languor that was now becoming nausea, did more than all Leo's efforts; Carla yielded. She raised her arms as high as it was necessary to raise them and arched her back as far as it was necessary to arch it; she did nothing to stop Leo from lowering the slip accurately to her belly; naked, she abandoned herself with closed eyes on the mattress; her nausea was increasing every minute; she was no longer thinking about anything; she felt like she was dying.

"Oh, what a beautiful child," Leo was thinking meanwhile. Her nudity blinded him, he didn't know where to start — whether from her thin, delicate, white shoulders or from her young, tender breasts, as white as milk, which his amazed and avid eyes couldn't get their fill of.

"Oh, beautiful child," and he was already leaning down to embrace her when he saw her lift a frightened, pale face and make

guttural sounds and movements with her chin that spoke for her tightly closed mouth. He freed himself and pulled aside; overcome, Carla rose up on the cot and stared fixedly at the trestle in the corner; Leo understood, grabbed the basin, and held it out to her just in time: from the girl's open mouth a dense, multicolored, steaming jet of vomit erupted into the rusty basin; she took a breath; then her tormented innards gave a great heave, and she started to vomit again. The man contemplated her angrily as he held up her forehead. "Mea culpa, I should say," he thought. "I shouldn't have made her drink that way." By now — it was useless to pretend otherwise — it was all over for that afternoon, there was nothing to be done about it. He looked at her and felt he would explode with rage: here she was, the girl of his dreams, naked, ready to give herself to him; but instead of holding her lover's head, she was holding that rusty basin on her knees and was staring down into it with spellbound eyes. "And to think," Leo said to himself again, "that if I hadn't made her drink so much, by this time she would have been mine."

Meanwhile, Carla had finished vomiting and was thrusting the basin away from her. Not without disgust, the man took it and replaced it on its tripod. When he turned around, he saw the girl sitting on the edge of the bed; she was still naked, with her head held low and her arms dangling, and he was struck by the contrast between the thinness of her body — all her ribs showed and her shoulders were narrow and sharp — and her abnormally large breasts and head. "She's out of proportion," he thought, to console himself. "How do you feel?" he asked out loud.

"Bad." She was still looking down, swirling the acidic saliva around in her mouth; every once in a while her eyes wandered over the clothing rolled down over her half-naked belly; she began to feel cold and a hopeless revulsion oppressed her. "It's all over," she thought; and in reality, as she intuited, something *had* ended up, without pleasure or dignity, in that old basin, although she wouldn't have been able to say, precisely, what it had been. She raised her head slowly and looked at her lover with eyes full of tears. "And now?" The words came out of her mouth almost before she knew it.

"Now get dressed and we'll go," answered the man, with a kind of contained rage; he stood up and began to pace up and down on the creaking floorboards. Every once in a while he glanced at Carla as she was dressing and felt his desire return; he asked himself over and over whether it wouldn't have been better to wait a while for the nausea to pass, then renew his assault on those delicious curves; but by now it was too late, and Carla was ready. "It's useless," he thought in frustration, "by this time the spell has been broken . . . nothing more to be done about it today."

He approached the cot. "How do you feel now?" he asked.

"Better," answered the girl, "better." She had finished dressing, and now she stood up; then, single file, not touching each other, they both walked out of the shed.

Outside, the leaves crackled. "Damn! It's raining," exclaimed Leo, surprised. Uneasy in the face of Carla's silence, he made an effort to seem nonchalant as they walked forward. The air under the shelter of the trees was still and suffocating, and black shadow enveloped the tangle of branches; with each step they took on the slippery soil, water oozed up out of the soaking leaves.

"It's weird," said the man, "every day the same weather. At daybreak it's clear, it clouds up in the morning, and then it rains from early afternoon until night."

No response.

"So, we'll see each other tonight," he insisted.

Carla stood still and looked at him. "Never again," she wanted to say, but the thought restrained her: "I have to sink down to the bottom . . . all the way to the bottom, into destruction," and she began to walk forward again. "Maybe . . . I don't know," she answered, hanging her head, not looking at him.

When they had reached the end of the pathway, they halted again. "See here," said Leo with a stupid smile, squeezing one of her arms, "see here, even when you're feeling sick, you're a beautiful child." They looked at each other. "If only I could love him," thought Carla, taking in the man's florid, inexpressive face. She was still a little drunk and her head hurt; she felt a great longing for abandon and affection. But instead Leo slapped her lightly on

the cheek. "Silly little thing," he said playfully, "silly little girl who wants to drink and then gets sick . . . little silly, little fool," and he drew her to him, "give me a kiss and we'll forget what happened." They kissed, then broke apart. Carla darted forward from the shelter of the pathway and, running through the rain, vanished behind the corner of the house.

"What an awful day," thought Leo, leaving the path in turn. "What a stupid day." The rain was now pouring steadily and calmly out of the high sky, the garden was soaked, and the wet, uninterrupted rustling of the rain abolished all other sounds. Leo went away discontented; not only had Carla's birthday cost him a half thousand lire, between the gift and the flowers, but also, thanks to that traitorous champagne, the adventure had ended in such a way that he wasn't sure whether it was more ridiculous or disgusting. "Carla wants exactly what I want," he thought angrily. "There was no need to get her drunk . . . now, however, we have to start up all over again."

It was not until he found himself on the street, wondering which way he should go, that he remembered that Lisa, only last night, had invited him to come over to her house this afternoon.

At first the idea of going back to his ancient lover seemed absurd; he didn't like riding roads he had already traveled, and he felt that visiting Lisa would be "warmed-up soup"; on the other hand, the lust that Carla had planted inside his body needed an outlet.

"If I don't come today," he thought, walking under the rain through the broad, empty streets of the wealthy suburb, "I'm going to explode." The image of Carla naked and weeping hovered in front of his eyes so insistently that he found himself lifting a hand to wave it away. "All right, let's go," he thought finally. "After all, Lisa's a woman, too."

This decision lent wings to his feet; he called to a taxi: "Via Boezio," he ordered, throwing himself onto the seat. The car took off, and Leo lit a cigarette. "It'll be the best day of her life," he thought, imagining how, as soon as she saw him, Lisa would throw herself at him. "Last night she played coy, she wanted to

rub my fur the wrong way, it's understandable, even she has her woman's pride . . . but today . . . today she'll hardly make me beg for it. . . ." As it rolled through the streets, the car made him slide back and forth; he was thinking how generous he was to go visit Lisa, how he was combining a good deed with something for himself. "It'll be the best day of her life," he repeated to himself. "I'll give her what she's never dared hope for and at the same time I'll at least get something out of this stupid day." He flicked his cigarette out the window. The car turned into a deserted street flanked by plane trees, its tires skidding slightly on the wet asphalt. He had the money in hand; the taxi came to a halt; Leo got out, bent over to pay in the pouring rain, and scurried hastily through the front door of the building.

He climbed the stairs slowly, recalling with satisfaction, but completely without melancholy, how many times he had climbed them ten years before. "There's no doubt about it," he said to himself, without even attempting to comprehend the significance of his thought, "ten years are ten years." He rang the bell and pushed through the door. Everything was the same as it had always been, so much so that for an instant he had the impression of being not himself as he was in the present, but himself as he'd been in the past; everything was in its place, the closets in the dark hallway, at the end of the hallway the tinkling glass-paned door to the boudoir, and then, look! the same lowered curtain, the same carpets. . . . He sat down in one of the creaking armchairs and lit a cigarette.

After a moment Lisa came in. "Oh! It's you!" she said carelessly, then sat down and looked at the man as if asking him the reason for his visit.

"Didn't you expect me?" asked Leo, astonished, since he had been convinced that she had been awaiting him with bated breath. "Last night you had me believing the opposite."

"Oh, one says so many things," she began, smoothing her skirt over her knees, "especially at night, when you can't see each other."

"She's sly," thought Leo. "She wants me to beg her." He

scooted his armchair over next to Lisa's and leaned forward toward her. "And instead, I'm convinced that you were speaking seriously."

"And if I changed my mind?" she inquired vivaciously. Now her weakness of the night before revealed itself to her in its true light: not a resurgence of love for Leo, but a momentary confusion, an unconsciousness of her true feelings for Michele. "So many things," she added earnestly, "can happen between yesterday and today."

Leo looked at her intently. His eyes wandered, now over her face, now over her body — to her cleavage, the first white swelling of her breasts, to the little patch of bare shoulder, which, in the sordid shadow of the boudoir, seemed fresher, cleaner, and fuller than it really was. "She wants to tempt me," he thought. "Ha, ha! She's as sly as a fox." He stretched toward her. "Do you know you've become extraordinarily beautiful?" he said.

"Ah! Why? Because I used to be ugly?" she exclaimed, flirting by instinct; but she regretted her weakness right away. "I have to send him away," she thought. "I have to make him understand that he's wrong." Then, looking at Leo and seeing him so flushed, excited, and sure of his conquest — it was enough just to watch him stretch toward her from the low armchair; his breast was bursting; his eyes, which he was trying to make expressive and passionate all at once, were shining with lust — she was seized by such great resentment mixed with victorious pride ("Now I love and am loved!" she wanted to shout) that she suddenly realized it would be much more fun, and much, much cleverer, to lead him on, to make him believe he was loved and desired, and then, without warning, to tell him the truth. In other words, to make a fool out of him.

"You've always been beautiful," he was saying in the meantime, "but now you're even more beautiful than usual."

"But you have Mariagrazia," protested Lisa, putting her plan into action. "What could *I* matter to you?"

"It's all over between me and that woman . . . all over . . . and instead, I find myself as interested in *you* as in the old days."

"Thank you so much."

"A misunderstanding," he went out, "has divided us up till today . . . just a misunderstanding. What do you want? Sometimes we make mistakes, and I made a mistake with you, I admit it . . . but today I've come here to say: Let's forget the past and make up."

He fell silent and held out his hand to Lisa.

She looked at his face, then at his hand. "Why 'make up'? We've never been in conflict to begin with."

"No, don't be like that," Leo protested. "I'm asking you right now, don't be like that. For god's sake, don't pretend you don't understand me, don't play — excuse the word — the fool. You understand very well what I'm talking about . . . I've laid it on the line. I'm talking about forgetting it all and making up and also, why not? . . . it's what *I'd* like to do . . . starting over, getting back together again. As you see, I don't beat around the bush, I say what I think and I say it straight out. Now it's up to you to respond."

"But . . . I don't know," she began, pretending to be very doubtful.

"What do you mean, you don't know? Come on, speak up."

"All right," concluded Lisa, "we can make up if you want . . . but as far as starting over, we'll just have to see."

"The important part's done," thought Leo happily, extremely happily. "She's not exactly stupid . . . she understands everything that's gone on. . . ." He bent down and kissed the woman's hand, then raised his head. "The thing I like most about you is your simplicity — I don't have to beat around the bush with you . . . no misunderstandings between us."

"The reason for that," she replied, underlining her words in a tone full of secret significance, "is because I always know how to guess people's intentions ahead of time."

"Ah! Excellent!" exclaimed Leo, scooting his chair even closer to Lisa's. "Just as an example . . . what intentions might I have right now?"

"You, right now." She looked at him. These verbal traps, this sort of ritual made up of questions and answers, but always aimed

at the same end! She had long abused them for her own purposes, but now they inspired a proud disgust in her. "It's over . . . all this is over," she thought. "Now I love and am loved"; but she wanted to play out her game to the end. "You, right now? It's certainly not hard to tell that. . . ."

"So, if you know what they are," insisted the man, aroused and congested, "tell me about them. . . ."

"All right," she began, looking modest and making use of half-secretive, half-malicious, but entirely efficient hesitant pauses, "if you really want to know . . . it seems to me that your intentions are . . . what shall I say? aggressive. . . ."

"Meaning?" asked Leo, bending so far forward that he almost brushed Lisa's nude shoulder with his chin.

She looked at him. "Meaning," she wanted to say to him, irritated by that red face shoved forward toward hers, "that it's useless for you to get all worked up about it, because I love Michele . . . Michele is my lover," but she held herself back. "Be careful," she warned him in bittersweet tones, "if you lean that far you might topple over."

Leo was too aroused to understand what she had said. "What? How?" he asked stupidly.

"You could fall over," Lisa repeated, "or have a stroke. . . ."

"Well, anyway," the man answered, speaking slowly and stubbornly without raising his head, "my intentions are very simple. You go get dressed and then we'll go out for tea somewhere . . . maybe at my place. Then we can eat supper and go see a play or a movie or something, and then I'll drive you back home."

A moment of silence; Lisa appeared very doubtful. "I'd come," she said at last, "but what proof do I have that you really love me and that this isn't just a passing whim, and then you'll go back to Mariagrazia?"

"No way," countered the man without raising his lowered head, with that obstinacy of his made up of impatience and repressed desire. "You're wrong. I told you once and I'll tell you again — I'm *not* going back with Mariagrazia, because things between her and me have been all over for a long time. I stayed with

her as long as I could. . . . It was one of those relationships that drag on and on and never come to an end, partly out of habit, partly for other reasons. . . ."

"Practical reasons?" suggested Lisa.

"What? Practical reasons! Look, to make it short" — Leo finally raised his eyes and looked into hers — "don't bring Mariagrazia into this, because she has nothing to do with it. Answer me, instead."

"Answer you what?"

"Oh, lovely," said Leo, trying for lightness and putting his hand on Lisa's shoulder as if he wanted to readjust the upper edge of her dress, "I told you . . . will you agree to come with me today or not?"

She hesitated; should she tell him the truth? But she was saved by that hand, which was now disingenuously touching and squeezing the nape of her neck, as if by accident.

"No," she protested, "let me go! Nothing annoys me more than being touched on the neck."

"But you used to like it so much," replied Leo slowly, staring at her intently and bringing his face close to hers.

"Yes . . . but I'm not the same woman I used to be," she said quickly, trying to resist the temptation of that hand, "so let me go."

"How about this?" asked Leo. He stood up abruptly, bent over her, pulled back her head by the hair, and attempted to kiss her; she was just in time to slide a hand in front of her mouth. "Come on, don't be naughty," Leo ordered, and in his eyes, and in the way in which he was trying to remove the obstacle of her hand, there was such a certainty of victory, and such an obvious skepticism about the seriousness of her refusal, that Lisa felt herself invaded by blind anger. She took her hand away from her mouth. "Let me go, I said," she hissed; her voice was stubborn and her eyes enraged. But the man took advantage of the situation to press his lips to her unwilling ones. For an instant she suffered the kiss, twisting and struggling in vain to free herself; then, finally, with a violent jerk, she managed to get to her feet; Leo lost his balance in the melee and fell backward into his armchair.

Then he stood up and smoothed his rumpled jacket nervously. "Lisa," he said, "let's not joke around. Didn't we decide to go back to being friends? What kind of behavior is this?"

She pointed theatrically to the door. "Get out," she ordered.

"What the hell?" began Leo, infuriated.

"I don't love you, I've never loved you!" shouted Lisa. Then she leaned forward and hissed into his face, "I let you believe I did for a moment today, just for the pleasure of hearing all the lies you'd tell me . . . and now, get out."

The man stood stock-still for an instant, astonished, then suddenly passed from this stony stupor to a stubborn and vindictive anger. "Oh, right!" he shouted. "So I should get out now! After playing your puppet! Well, I won't go . . ." — he hesitated, searching in vain, in his fury, for an expiation commensurate with Lisa's guilt — should he break up a piece of her furniture? Smash some of her china? Slap her?

"I won't go until I've kissed you." He shoved the chair aside and tried to throw his arms around Lisa; in his rage that kiss had come to stand for complete physical possession. He thought confusedly of throwing the woman down on the ground and taking her there on the carpet; but Lisa slid out of his grasp and took refuge behind one of the armchairs. For a moment they stood face-to-face and curved toward each other, both gripping the armchair, keeping an eye on each other, each of them trying to guess the other's next move. "Get out!" she said finally; she was panting, tousled, frightened by the brutality that was swelling the man's face right before her eyes. Then, with coarse cunning, Leo's hand seized her abruptly by the hair; he shoved the chair to one side, thrust his arms around her, and pressed her to his breast.

They wrestled for some seconds, Leo trying to fend off Lisa's wild swipes, and Lisa straining to break free of his embrace; she succeeded at last and ran to the door. "Get out," she ordered again, in a broken voice, "get out or I'll call for help." She was flushed, rumpled, and breathless; her dress had come unbuttoned over one shoulder, and her breasts were spilling out, over its neckline; her hands were glued to the door. "Get out," she repeated;

but someone in the hallway was pushing against the door and trying to get in.

"It doesn't matter, Maria!" she shouted without turning around, "I don't need you."

"Open up," commanded whoever was pushing the door inward, in a masculine voice, "I'm not Maria . . . open up." Mechanically, Lisa drew back to one side. The door swung open and Michele walked in.

He had his hat in his hand and was wearing a soaked green raincoat. He looked at Lisa, half-dressed and panting, and at Leo, beet red; immediately his mind went into gear, reconstructing the events that had led up to the scene before him. "Leo came over," he thought, "to renew their old ties, and Lisa rejected him"; but he didn't act on these thoughts; he felt confusedly that he should take advantage of the situation to make a definitive break with Lisa; and besides, wasn't that the obligatory attitude under the circumstances?

"Excuse me," he said in a colorless voice, which he was trying to make sound ironic, "the fault is all mine . . . I had decided never to come here again and I came anyway. I've disturbed you two . . . excuse me." He made a ridiculous, rigid bow, turned on his heel, and vanished; the door closed behind him.

That devilish jack-in-the-box who had sprung out of the hallway shadows and then immediately melted back into them had calmed Leo down. He smiled. "Is *he* your love, Lisa?" he asked.

Immersed in her astonishment, she nodded her head gloomily. Then, suddenly, tormented by the thought that Michele might be leaving her forever without a word, she ran to the window and threw it wide open.

Her apartment was one floor up and its windows were very low; she leaned out and looked. The air was cold, the street wet and deserted; it was raining; a large leafless plane tree planted in front of her obstructed her sight of the sky; but a few meters to the left someone in a green raincoat belted at the waist was walking away tranquilly, headed toward the walls. "Michele!" she called,

leaning way out. "Michele!" She saw him turn slightly, glance at her curiously, and continue walking. "Michele!" she shouted at the top of her voice; this time the boy waved, without turning around, without stopping. He grew ever more distant, walking at a good pace down the wet, shining sidewalk; soon he would turn the corner; Lisa realized it was useless to insist and turned back into the room.

"He'll be back, don't worry," said Leo, with false good humor, standing straight up in the middle of the room. "I know him . . . he's not the type that takes things seriously. . . . He'll be back, you can count on it."

His voice was provocative, abusive, mortally insulting. With great dignity, Lisa moved past him and went to push a button on the opposite wall; a minute went by and then the maid appeared.

"Maria, accompany the gentleman to the door." It was the end, the utterly banal and ridiculous end; it took only two steps from where Leo was standing to reach the door. The "gentleman" left, stammering ignobly, "I'm going, Lisa . . . I'm going . . . say hello to Michele for me." The maid didn't understand and looked stupidly now at the man, now at Lisa; but Leo didn't wait for her to show him the way; he took his hat and overcoat and left on his own.

The rain refreshed his spirits; he opened up his umbrella and walked along almost thoughtlessly. "It could have worked and it could not have worked," he consoled himself at a certain point, "and it didn't work." And later, serenely: "Today I learned my lesson: that's a key I'm better off not pressing." After that he didn't think of anything at all, just lit a cigarette and, taking care to not get his feet wet in the puddles, walked on at his usual pace, neither slow nor fast.

He came to the end of the street and emerged into a vast, rainy piazza with no monuments and no gardens. At a corner a small group of people were waiting for the streetcar, standing under the overhang at the stop; when he approached them, he recognized Michele, leaning against the pylon. "Hey! You're still here," he said to him, without a shadow of rancor.

"Yes," said the boy, raising bored eyes to the man's, "I'm waiting." An instant of silence.

"Well, then," said Leo, "since I'm going back home I can offer you a ride in my cab. . . . Taxi!"

Michele accepted. "But what's this all about?" he wondered, throwing himself down on the seat next to the man. For a minute they didn't speak.

"Would you tell me," asked the man at last, "why you went off like that? Didn't you realize that all she wanted was for you to stay?"

Michele didn't answer right away; he looked out the window at the wet facades of the houses. "I know," he said at last.

"Well, then! Why didn't you stay?"

"Because . . . because I don't love her."

This response made Leo smile. "Look," he began, "do you really believe that you can only be with a woman if you *love* her?"

"That's what I believe," replied Michele without turning, in a serious tone.

"Oh, well then . . . ," murmured Leo, rather disconcerted. "But I, for example," he added mildly, "have had perhaps even too many women I never loved . . . I took Lisa herself without loving her . . . despite which, I've never had anything to regret about it. I've had as much fun as anybody."

"I don't doubt it," said Michele through clenched teeth. "God damn you! Do you think everyone in the world is like you?" he thought, and wished he could say.

"And then, let's be realistic," Leo continued. "When I see a boy like yourself, without much in the way of acquaintances, without much in the way of resources, scorn a woman like Lisa — who may be what she may be, but is surely not to be despised — well, it seems to me that the world's turned upside down."

"Let it be upside down, then," murmured Michele, but the man didn't hear him.

"Bah! Do what you want as far as I'm concerned," concluded Leo; he lit a cigarette and retreated into his overcoat.

Michele looked at him. "So, according to you," he said, "I shouldn't renounce Lisa."

"Of course not," retorted Leo, taking the cigarette out of his mouth. "First of all, because Lisa really isn't a woman to throw away. Why, just today I was looking at her. . . . She's fat but firm . . . and she has breasts," he added, winking at Michele, who was feeling disgusted, "and hips. . . . And besides, dear boy, there's a woman who can give you much more and much greater satisfaction than any of the usual young rosewater *signorine*. She's full of fire . . . a real woman. . . . And in the second place, where are you going to find a lover these days who can see you at home? This, for you who can't afford a hotel room or an apartment, is a great advantage: you go, you come, you enter, you exit, no one says anything to you, it's as if you were in your own house; you could give a damn. Otherwise, especially at your age, you always end up having to take your lover to certain ugly places — restaurants, hotels, places that take away your appetite just thinking about them. And if you add to all this that Lisa won't cost you a cent, I'm saying not a single cent . . . why, I don't know what more you could possibly want."

"Right, right," repeated the boy to himself rather sadly, "what more could I possibly want?" He said nothing but sat a little hunched over, looking now at the man and now at the street; it was already dusk, but the lamps weren't lit yet. A damp shadow had invaded the crowded street, so that he couldn't see to the end of it; and men, umbrellas, vehicles, everything beyond a certain point merged into a single, rainy distance in which he could see, moving rapidly and in isolation, the yellow lights of the streetcars and the automobiles. "And now what shall I do?" he asked himself — every time he observed the movement and continual agitation of life, his own inertia scared him.

"Come on, dear boy," he heard Leo say, "don't think so much. The thing is a lot simpler than you're making it out to be. All Lisa is doing is waiting for you. . . . Go back this evening and she'll welcome you with open arms."

Michele turned. "Then I would have to pretend I loved her."

"What are you talking about? Why pretend?" interrupted Leo. "Who's making you do that? Don't try to make the thing deeper

than it is . . . what's essential is that she's eager to go to bed with you . . . so accept her and be happy."

Lost in thought, Michele had gone back to watching the street. "Make him stop in the piazza," he said, "I'm getting out." An instant of silence. "Suppose," he added, "that someone had insulted you in some way . . . but you don't dislike the guy, and in fact, even though he insulted you, you can't bring yourself to hate him. What do you do? Do you pretend to take offense and slap him around, or not?"

"It depends on the insult," Leo answered.

"There could be no greater."

"But in that case," retorted the man, "it would be impossible for me to keep liking him, impossible for it not to matter to me."

"But just suppose. . . ."

"All right, then, I'd slap him around," replied Leo without hesitation. The taxi stopped in the piazza; but before Michele could get out, Leo tugged at one of his sleeves. "Now, don't forget what I told you," he said, with a wink and an expressive gesture, "about Lisa . . . go for it!" After that, he rolled back on the cushion and yelled out his address; the taxi pulled away.

Within five minutes he was back at home. He went into his study, an almost completely bare room, with a high, brown, wooden baseboard and American-style bookshelves and desk, and sat down. The rainy twilight shadows gave the banal furniture and utilitarian objects an unbearable aspect of tedium that was almost ghostlike. It was the worst hour of the day, when it was no longer white afternoon but not yet black night. The daylight was too dim for him to see clearly and the lamplight too strong for that gray penumbra. Still, Leo overcame his discomfort easily, switched on a small lamp, read a business letter, and started to write a reply. At that moment his phone rang.

Without putting down his pen, he picked up the receiver and brought it to his ear.

"With whom am I speaking?" asked a woman's voice.

"Mariagrazia's voice," thought Leo. "Thirty-one, four, nine, six," he answered.

"Am I speaking with Signor Merumeci?" insisted the voice.

"Yes."

"Then this is Mariagrazia. Carla has proposed that we go to a dance this evening at the Ritz. Do you want to come with us?"

"All right . . . in about an hour," said the man.

"By the way," she went on, "when are we going to see each other?"

But Leo had recognized the beginning of one of her usual, interminable discussions.

"We'll see," he replied, and abruptly hung up the phone.

After this conversation, he finished his letter and slowly wrote another. It was not that he had business affairs, in the true sense of the word; he didn't work; his activities were limited to the administration of his properties, which consisted of a few houses and some cautious speculations in the stock market. However, his wealth grew by regular increments with each passing year, since he never spent more than three-fourths of his income from rentals, devoting the rest to the purchase of new apartments.

He sealed the letter, lit a cigarette, and walked into his bedroom; he had an hour in which to shave, dress, and show up at the Ardengos'. He went into the bathroom and washed, shaved himself accurately with and against the growth, went back into the bedroom, and began to get dressed. Well-made, high-quality clothing gave him immense pleasure; getting dressed in them was one of his favorite occupations. He slipped on a white silk shirt over which he knotted a black-and-silver tie; then he pulled on socks of gray and red wool; finally he put on (and this took some considerable contortion) a dark blue herringbone suit of a truly extraordinary cut. Then he admired himself in the closet mirror; and whether it was the half-light in the room that transformed him and made him look younger, or whether it was the beautiful suit that clouded his judgment, he acknowledged, inside himself, that he was handsome, noble, and even in a certain way dignified and melancholy; then he glanced at his watch; three-quarters of an hour had already passed. He left in a hurry, rushed into the garage, and backed out the car. Ten minutes later he was ringing the Ardengos' doorbell.

Only one lamp was lit in the living room, and Leo saw Carla sitting motionless beside it. Obviously ready to go out, she was wearing a light, peach-colored dress; she wore makeup and powder and had curled her hair. "Mamma's coming down in a minute," she said.

"Excellent," began Leo, sitting down and rubbing his hands together energetically. "And . . . how are you feeling?"

"Fine." There was a silence. Leo took the girl's hand, brought it to his lips, and kissed it. "So now what are we doing?"

"We're going out dancing," she replied dreamily, "and tonight you'll have supper with us, right?"

"Maybe not supper," answered Leo, "but I'll be here for sure afterward."

There was the sound of doors opening and closing. The girl drew back her hand swiftly; Michele came in. "Oh, what splendor!" he cried, with forced gaiety. "Good evening, Leo. My, my . . . what are you doing here, you rich, happy, well-dressed people?"

"We're going out dancing," said Carla, in the same tone and the same voice in which she had said it before.

"Dancing?" Michele sat down. "In that case, I'll come as well . . . do you want me to, Carla?"

"It's Leo that invited us," she said, looking at her lover.

Leo raised his head. "Like hell I invited them," he wished he could answer.

"What do you mean, Leo?" Michele protested. "I'm still capable of paying my own way, I think." Carla looked at Leo again.

"What does that have to do with it?" he hastened to answer Michele. "I invited you and it's understood that I'll pay for everything."

For a moment all three sat in silence. Then, "However, Michele," said his sister, "you can come only if you go up and change your clothes first."

"You're right, you're right," said the boy, looking down at himself. He was incredibly filthy: his shoes were all muddy and his trousers were mud-splattered up to the knees and wrinkled by

rain. "How right you are. Thanks a million, most generous friend," he directed at Leo, as he stood up. "I'll just go and clean myself off." He bowed and left the room.

"I feel sad," said Carla, even before the door closed.

"Why?"

"Who knows?" She gazed toward the black panes of the window, where an ephemeral sparkling revealed the fall of the rain. "Maybe it's the weather." Her heavy head drooped weakly in Leo's direction, and he grasped it by the hair and kissed her. "You'll dance with me," she said after the kiss, with a sort of serene immodesty, "and only with me. You'll leave Mamma sitting there . . . she can dance with the others . . . with Michele, maybe." She gave a dry laugh. She truly felt a year older. "It's the end," she thought.

They kissed each other again, and then Leo said, deliberately, "So, you'll come to me tonight, won't you, Carla?"

She turned pale. "What do you mean, 'to you'?"

"To my place," explained Leo, looking into her eyes. He saw her hesitate, then bend her head as if she wanted to look for some object lost in the carpet. "No . . . that's impossible," she said at last.

"What do you mean, impossible?" insisted Leo. "You promised me . . . you have to come."

"No . . . no." She shook her head. "It's impossible."

For a moment they didn't speak. Leo gazed at the girl; the sight of those breasts of hers, all wrapped up in her dress, excited him; he grew unusually hot and the blood rose to his cheeks. "What a lover she'll be!" he thought. "What great stuff! What a lover!" He was grinding his teeth in desire; he grabbed her by the waist. "Carla," he said, "you *must* come, it's absolutely necessary. If you don't come, then . . ." He hesitated, trying to think of a pretext that would move her. All of a sudden he recalled how disgusted she was with the life she was living, how deeply she longed for a new one. "Then . . . ," he finished modestly, "how are you going to make a new life for yourself?"

She stared at him. "All he wants is to have some fun with me,"

she thought, with a vivid sense of reality, "but he's right. My new life?" She understood that in order to change she must first destroy without pity; but this nocturnal surrender in a stranger's house repelled her, she was afraid of it. "I'll come in the daytime," she suggested, with a false simplicity, "one of these days . . . all right? We'll have tea together . . . we'll talk . . . is that all right with you?"

"I don't want tea. I want you," said Leo; but he pulled back immediately into an earnestness he knew to be more efficient. "No, my love . . . tonight or never."

"But, look, Leo . . ." pleaded the girl.

"I'll be waiting for you in the car, I'll be parked on the street," continued her lover, "and I'll drive you back home before dawn." He looked at her for a second. "And you'll see, you'll dislike it so little . . . you'll come back every night."

"No," she said, somewhat frightened, "no, afterward everything has to be clear, out in the open . . . we have to tell everyone everything." Looking at the man, she suddenly wanted to scream, she felt so much anguish. "Every night," she repeated inside herself. "What's all this? How did I get here?"

"I'm sure you'll come," said Leo, taking her roughly into his arms. "Tell me, isn't it true that you'll come?"

She latched onto her last defense: "It's only two days since we . . . that we . . . love each other . . . why not wait? Don't you think every woman has her pride?"

"My dear," said the man quickly, "I understand . . . it means that I can expect you without fail tonight. Doesn't it?"

She hesitated again, her eyes shifting under her little hat. "I'll tell you at the dance," she said finally. "Yes," she added, as if to convince herself, "you can be sure, I'll tell you at the dance."

"God be praised," thought Leo as he hugged her. "And now all we have to do is go to this dance," he said gaily, taking the girl by the hips and drawing her frightened, painted face up to his own passionate one. "Do you know what you are? A love . . . yes! A love of a little girl."

The sound of the door: "So, shall we go, Merumeci?" asked the mother, coming in.

Leo stood up. "Yes . . . very good," he replied quickly, "by all means, let's go." Carla got up, too, and walked over to her mother. "Why aren't you bringing the purse Merumeci gave you?" asked Mariagrazia, examining her daughter from top to toe. "It would go perfectly with that dress."

"I'll go get it and come right back," said Carla. She left the room.

She climbed the stairs in a hurry and ran into her room; the purse was there on the bureau. It was truly elegant, in exquisite taste. Picking it up, it suddenly struck her that this could be the first in a long series of gifts; the thought hit her so hard that she stood without moving in front of the mirror, looking at her reflection. Look: she seemed to see herself sitting on Leo's knees, slapping his cheek playfully; or resting her head affectionately against his breast, asking him under her breath to give her the money for some pretty dress. Or she was going, along with her lover, to some famous milliner, to pick up the three or four Parisian hats she had ordered — this season's new fashion, which she liked so much. To tell the truth, this was all very attractive to her, as was owning a car, a house, some jewelry; as was taking trips, seeing people and places . . . in other words, not having to limit her activities and desires . . . oh, very attractive. And she was smiling despite herself when suddenly, drawing closer to the mirror, she became aware of a reddish bruise . . . which she tried to rub out with her fingers, but . . . She examined it, and then she remembered that Leo, just a few moments before, had kissed her on the neck. She was gripped by an absurd fear that her mother would notice it, so she opened her compact and powdered herself heavily. Suddenly, as she was twisting around in front of the mirror to see if that guilty mark was completely covered up, Leo's imperious invitation to come over to his place tonight, and those dreamed-of gifts and dresses, revealed themselves to her as linked, bound together by an inevitable association. "My god, is this my new life?" she asked

herself, experiencing a superficial and conventional fear, not yet conscious enough of the truth of her feeling to be truly frightened. "Is this how it would be?" But she didn't have time to delve any more deeply; already from out of the night, from the other side of the garden, the strident honk of the horn was calling to her, telling her it was time to go.

She turned out the light and ran down the stairs. And as she performed these practical acts, although no precise thought came to the front of her mind, a sharp sorrow, and a longing to weep were tormenting her, contracting her face into a ridiculous grimace. The hallway was dark; she felt her way through, blundering into the vestibule, and then opened the door, to be greeted by the festive cries of the others — her mother, Leo, and Michele — who were waiting for her in the car. The driveway was wrapped in thick darkness and the rain poured down in silence. She could see nothing but a few gleaming reflections bouncing off the car and the glowing yellow windows behind which, from the inside of the padded box, the happy, rosy, satisfied faces of the other three curiously watched her approach. It was only an instant; then Carla climbed in and fell back to sit beside her lover; the car started up.

None of them spoke for the entire length of the trip. Leo drove the big automobile capably through the confusion of the congested streets; Carla, sitting motionless, dreamily watched the action on the streets on the other side of the shining hood: out there, between two black parades of umbrellas, the cars with their red lights darted every which way in the rain, as if they were crazy. Mariagrazia was also gazing out through the window, but more to be seen than to see; that big, luxurious car made her feel happy and rich, and every time the face of some poor, common person emerged from the shadowy swarm of the street and passed under her eyes, borne along by the current of the crowd, she would have liked that unknown person to see her grimace of contempt, as if she were saying, "You're on foot, you ugly moron, and it serves you right, you don't deserve anything better . . . whereas I, on the

other hand, deserve to fend off the crowd, sitting at my ease on these plush seats."

Only Michele wasn't looking at the street; he was more interested by the contents of the automobile, that sumptuous box — that's what it felt like to him, anyway. Shadow concealed the faces of his three companions, but every time the car passed under a streetlamp, a vivid light illumined the seated, motionless passengers, and he could see the face of his mother, with her hollow, washed-out features and self-absorbed eyes; Carla's face, too, childish and entranced, like a little girl going to a party; and Leo's, in profile, red, regular, somewhat hard, like those inexplicable, frightening objects revealed during storms, just for an instant, by flashes of lightning. And each time Michele saw them, he was amazed to be with them. "Why are they *them*," he thought, "and not someone else?" Those figures were more foreign to him than ever; he almost couldn't recognize them. It seemed to him that a blond with blue eyes in place of Carla, a thin, tall woman in place of his mother, and a nervous little man in place of Leo would not change his life very much. There they were in the shadows, immobile; every jolt of the car made them bump against each other like lifeless mannequins; nothing was more agonizing, he felt, than to see them so distant, detached, and alone, and no remedy for any of it.

They arrived; four black rows of cars filled up the dark piazza in front of the hotel, cars of every size and kind, while their drivers, dressed from head to foot in shiny waterproof raingear, huddled together in little groups to smoke and talk. However, in luminous contrast to the dark, wintry night, the front door of the Ritz was resplendent with luxurious, welcoming light. It was a revolving door made of crystal and wood, which introduced them with its familiar purr, one after the other, into the lobby filled with footmen and servants; they went through the coatroom, stuffed to bursting with numbered coats, passed by a series of gilded, empty salons, and reached the ballroom. A man selling tickets sat next to the door behind a small table; Leo paid; they walked in.

It was already late, and a large crowd filled the long, low room. All the tables were pushed against the walls so that people could dance in the middle, and at the end of the room, on a sort of platform shaded by two palm trees, a band of American negroes was playing the music.

"What a crowd," said Mariagrazia, mixing pessimism and admiration, glancing around her in a very dignified way. "You'll see, Carla, we won't be able to find a place."

However, despite her predictions, they did find a little table tucked into a corner and all sat down; the mother took off her cape. "Look," she said, gazing around at the room and then turning vaguely to her three companions, "there are a lot of people we know here. Look, Carla . . . the Valentinis. . . ."

"And the Santandreas, Mamma."

"And the Contris," added her mother. She leaned over slightly and whispered, "Speaking of the Santandreas, do you know about the honeymoon trip they made to Paris two months ago? They were all in the same sleeping car, the bride, the groom, and the bride's boyfriend . . . what's his name?"

"Giorgetti," said Carla.

"Giorgetti, that's right . . . exactly. Imagine, what a scandal! Even just saying it, it doesn't seem possible."

The set was over; the dancers clapped and returned to their seats. Immediately the buzz of conversation grew louder, and Mariagrazia turned to her lover. "What would you say," she proposed, "about going to the theater tonight to see that French company? I have a box for the second showing, either tonight or the night after tomorrow."

"I can't tonight," said the man, staring intently at Carla. "I have an appointment at eleven that I can't get out of."

"An appointment at eleven o'clock at night," repeated the mother; her voice was both intimate and sarcastic. "Do tell, Merumeci, masculine or feminine?"

Leo hesitated; should he rouse her jealousy or not? "Feminine, of course," he said at last, "but I didn't explain myself very well.

It's not an appointment but a visit . . . a cold supper at the home of a signora who's receiving a few friends."

"And who might this signora be, if I'm allowed to ask?" asked the mother irritably, in a harsh voice. Leo was taken aback; he hadn't foreseen this indiscretion; he rummaged around in his mind for the name of someone she wouldn't know. "Smithson," he came up with at last, "you know . . . the painter."

"Oh! Wonderful!" His lover preened in bitter triumph. "Smithson. . . . It's a shame, a real shame that only the day before yesterday I should have gone to my milliner's, and that this milliner of mine should have shown me a hat that Signora Smithson had ordered to be sent to her in Milano . . . right . . . because this painter lady of yours has been in Milano for the past five days."

"What do you mean, in Milano?" repeated Leo in surprise.

"Yes, that's true," Michele broke in, "didn't you know? They left ahead of time to be at the *vernissage* — the preview of her one-woman show."

"So keep your appointment with Smithson!" Now she was smiling poisonously. "Do go . . . but I'm afraid that even if you catch the next train, or even an airplane, you may not make it in time." She stopped talking for a second, and Leo said nothing; Carla observed her mother intently, with something like fear. "*Dear Leo*, lies have short legs," her mother went on. "Would you like me to tell you instead who this famous signora is, with whom you have an appointment? Surely no honest woman; you don't know any. . . . Some slut off the streets is more like it, that's right, some common whore."

This time Carla turned so pale that Leo was afraid for a moment that she might faint or burst into tears. But she didn't, only saying, "Mamma, don't yell that way," in a placid voice, "somebody might hear you."

Three drumrolls sounded; the dance was starting back up. "So, Leo," said Carla, "shall we dance?"

They walked single file to the dance floor, squeezing around

the people sitting at the tables. The extreme pallor the man had noticed before on Carla's cheeks was still there as she wound her way through the talkative tables, and a kind of rigid dignity informed her face; but once they were in the thick of the crowd, before placing her hand on Leo's shoulder and her waist in position to dance, she lifted her face up to his. "I want you to understand, Leo," she said firmly — almost, he thought, through clenched teeth — "that tonight I'm coming to you. Be sure to wait for me."

"Seriously?"

"Absolutely." Her voice had changed now; it was no longer firm, but trembling; it appeared that both breath and faith were deserting her. "But now," she added, "don't talk to me anymore. I just want to dance."

So they danced. Leo supported the girl by the waist with the full strength of his arm; a lightness and unusual ardor lent wings to his feet, and although the space was narrow and the crowd pressing, he pushed himself, successfully, to execute the most difficult dance steps.

"This time I've got you," he thought, "I've got you."

The girl's spirit, instead, was filled with a sad confusion. She danced reluctantly, wishing she could escape the crowd and sit by herself in a corner and close her eyes. Continually moving, the carousel of dancers spun in front of her eyes: faces of men and women, expressionless, earnest, or smiling; the music was triumphant, victorious, yet not without a small, quivering chord of sorrow in its insistent refrain. Faces and music: having to see them and hear it made her head spin.

The dance number ended and the couples returned to their tables. Among them were her mother and Michele, arguing bitterly. "I'll never dance with you again," Mariagrazia was saying indignantly.

"What's the matter here?" asked Leo authoritatively.

"Never again!" repeated the mother. "And to think that they were all watching us . . . who knows what they will have thought! It was terrible . . . he was dancing like . . . like . . . ," she searched

for an appropriate epithet, but in her disordered contempt couldn't find one, "like a thief!"

"Ah! Really?" exclaimed Leo, at a loss.

"Like a lewd . . . lecher," she corrected herself with dignity.

"And may I inquire," asked her son, making an effort to smile, "may I please inquire how *thieves* dance? And in our little company, who is the *thief*, me or someone else?"

"Do shut up," pleaded his mother, looking around.

"No, I won't," Michele insisted. "Anyway, I dance like a *victim* of theft . . . my earthly load lightened, all passion and transport. To find out how *thieves* dance, you'd better go with someone else . . . yes," he affirmed, staring fixedly at Leo, "with somebody else."

For a moment Leo, sitting stock-still between the two anxious women, said nothing. Then he smiled. "I really believe," he said, standing up, "that something has happened to you, Michele. And that's why it would be best if you left now . . . unless you would rather I left, myself."

"Yes, do go, Michele!" pleaded his mother. He looked at her. "So," he said — it escaped from his mouth — "you prefer to send away your own son rather than a stranger like Leo?"

"But if Leo invited us?"

There was nothing to say. "She's right," thought Michele, "it was Leo who paid." He looked around: the long, low room was buzzing with conversation at a deafening level, and all those groups of people — the made-up women with their bare, crossed legs, the men slouching nonchalantly in their chairs with cigarettes in their mouths — all those groups were eating, drinking, and talking, all so carelessly; the negroes were playing their instruments under the palm trees; there was nothing to say. "You're right," he said at last. "I'll go away now. Have fun. The thief is going away."

And he left.

Outside it was still raining. "*Thief, thief, thief,*" Michele chanted to himself, not in scorn, but with a sort of false exaltation. "He even tried to steal Lisa from me . . . so who's the *thief?*" But a few minutes later he had to admit to himself, much to his chagrin,

that he wasn't angry at all; not at all — he felt completely serene. Evidently nothing Leo could do, no matter how evil, could shake Michele's indifference; after a false burst of hatred, he always ended up coming to, finding himself once again with an empty head, dazed and light as a leaf.

The sidewalks were packed with people, the street teemed with cars; it was traffic hour. Michele walked along slowly, without an umbrella, under the rain as if it were a dry, sunny day, looking lazily at the shop windows, the women, the electrically lit advertisments suspended in the dark. But for all his efforts, he couldn't manage to interest himself in this old street scene; the anguish that had invaded him for no reason as he had crossed the empty salons of the hotel was still lodged within him, and his own image, the image of himself as he really was and which he could not forget, haunted him; he seemed to see himself now: alone, miserable, and indifferent.

He felt a sudden desire to go to a movie. There was a movie theater on that street, a very luxurious one, over whose marble door a showy electric marquee flashed round and round in perpetual motion. Michele approached it and looked at the posters; some Chinese thing made in America; too stupid. He lit up a cigarette and resumed his hopeless walk in the rain in the midst of the crowd; then he threw down the cigarette; nothing to do.

But in the meantime his anguish was increasing, there was no doubt about that; he was already familiar with the process: first, a vague uncertainty, a lack of self-confidence, a sense of futility, combined with a need to be busy, to *do* things, to feel strongly about *something*; then, little by little, the dry throat, the bitter taste in the mouth, the wide-open eyes, the insistent refrain in his empty mind of certain absurd phrases — all in all, a furious desperation devoid of illusions. Michele lived in painful fear of this particular anguish. He didn't want to think about it; he wanted to live like everyone else, from minute to minute, without deep anxieties, at peace with himself and with others; he wanted "to be an imbecile," he sighed to himself at times; but always when he least expected it, a word, an image, a thought would call him back to

the eternal question, and then all his distraction crumbled, every effort he made was in vain, he had to think.

That day, as he was walking slowly down the crowded sidewalks, he looked down at the hundreds of feet shuffling along in the wet and was struck by the futility of his own movement. "All these people," he thought, "know where they're going and what they want, they have a purpose and so they hurry along, they're tormented, sad, happy, *alive*, while I . . . I have nothing . . . no purpose . . . if I weren't walking I'd be sitting down; it makes no difference." He couldn't tear his eyes away from the ground: there was, truly, in all those feet stamping through the grime a kind of certainty, a faith he didn't have, and as he watched them, the disgust he felt for himself grew even greater; so, he was this way wherever he went, aimless, indifferent; and this rainy street was his very life, traveled without faith and without enthusiasm, his dazed eyes dazzled by the cheap, gaudy splendors of electric advertisements. "For how long?" He looked up at the sky: the stupid ads were up there, flashing round and round in the darkness above him. One recommended a brand of toothpaste, another a kind of shoe polish. "And where am I going?" he asked himself again, running a finger under his collar. "What *am* I? Why not run, why not scurry around like all these other people? Why not be an instinctive man, a sincere man? Why not have faith?" The anguish oppressed him, it was bearing him down. He felt like stopping one of the passersby, grabbing him by the lapels, and asking him where he was going, why he was rushing forward that way. He longed to have a purpose, any sort of purpose, even a self-deceiving one, instead of shuffling along like this from one street to another, in the midst of people who had one. "Where am I going?" There had been a time, it seemed to him, when men had understood the path they were taking from the first step to the last; but not now; a head in a sack; darkness, obscurity, blindness; still, one had to go *someplace*; where? Michele thought of going home.

A sudden sense of urgency seized him. But the streets were swarming with traffic; too many cars were advancing slowly, bumper to bumper, at the edge of the sidewalks; it was impossible

to cross. Stalled beneath the diagonal rain, between the facades of the houses, some black, some brightly lit up, the automobiles waited in two opposing files for a gap in which they could leap forward; and Michele waited, too. As he stood there, his attention was drawn to a car larger and more luxurious than the others. A man was sitting inside it, leaning stiffly against the backrest with his head in shadow; a woman's arm was thrown across his chest. It was obvious that she had been sitting beside him and then had slid onto his knees to grasp his shoulder in her hand, as if she were pleading without daring to look him in the face. The motionless man and the clinging woman flashed for an instant as if frozen in the white light of the streetlamps in front of Michele's eyes; then the automobile began to advance, sliding forward like a whale between the other cars; now all he could see was a tiny red light glowing above the license plate; it felt like a cry; then this last sign vanished, as well.

This vision left him with a nervous sadness that felt unbearable. He didn't know that man and that woman — they must surely move in a circle far different from his and might even be foreign — yet it seemed to him that that scene had emerged from his own mind, his own heart; that it was one of his own anxious fantasies, made flesh and offered up to his eyes by some superior will. *That* was his world, where one suffered sincerely and clung to pitiless shoulders and pleaded in vain — not this limbo of absurd voices and false sentiments in which his mother, Lisa, Carla, Leo, all his people, played out their parts, distorted figures devoid of truth. Why, Michele could have *really hated* that man, could have *really loved* that woman; but he knew it was useless to hope: that promised land was forbidden to him and he would never reach it.

Meanwhile, a traffic guard had interrupted the cars' interminable passage, and Michele started to cross. But in the middle of the street, he was attacked by a kind of dizziness, a sort of intolerable distress, and he took off his hat and let the rain pour down on his uncovered head.

He couldn't have described what he was feeling. A great

number of indefinite desires were seething in his soul, and the torment of thought was making him suffer even physically. An empty taxi slowed and pulled up beside him; he climbed in and gave the driver his address; but he was still full of the memory of those two, the man and the woman clinging together in their luxurious automobile. "If I knew where they were going," he thought, almost seriously, "I could give the driver their address . . . I could go to them and beg them to take me with them. . . ." These absurdities and the fantasies that accompanied them calmed him down a little. But with every jolt of the journey, he seemed to be waking up, once again, from some unattainable dream, and he understood bitterly, over and over, that these fantasies would not even minimally transform his life.

Within five minutes he had arrived; he crossed the park hurriedly through the pouring rain and entered the dark vestibule. Even the hallway was immersed in darkness; he hung his coat and hat on the back of a chair and, without turning on any lights, headed toward the stairs, feeling his way through the dark. But as he was passing the door to the living room, he realized that a faint light was streaming through the keyhole, and he heard music he recognized as a dance tune — the same tune, he thought, that he had heard not long ago in the hotel ballroom. "It's a persecution," he thought, opening the door and walking in. The half of the living room that was usually consecrated to conversation had been left in darkness, while the half beyond the arch and the two columns was brightly lit; someone was playing the piano. He walked farther into the room, and the person who had been bent over the keyboard turned and looked at him: it was Lisa.

"She came over to explain things to me," thought Michele, annoyed, "as if I hadn't already understood everything." He sat down in an armchair in the shadows.

"We've been to the Ritz," he said calmly, "but it was actually such a bore that I left. Besides, if you can imagine it, I quarreled with Leo."

She looked at him with curiosity. "Ah! Really?" she asked, getting up and coming over to him, then sitting down as close to him

as she could. "Why did you do that?" she asked in a hesitant, intimate tone of voice. "Was it because of me?"

Michele looked at her insecure face and was hard put not to laugh. "My poor Lisa," he felt like answering her, "what do I have to do to convince you that I don't love you?" But compassion restrained him. "No," he replied shortly, "not because of you . . . because of family stuff, stuff that has to do with my mother."

"Ah! I understand," said Lisa, a little disappointed. She gazed at Michele with intensity and passion, tormented by the desire to justify herself and explain how things had really gone, "After which," she thought, "everything will be cleared up and he'll rest his head on my knees like he did this morning." She thought and thought as the minutes passed, but she could find no pretext for speaking of what lay closest to her heart; they looked at each other.

"I said that," Lisa began at last, "because I think you have every reason to be angry with Leo and me."

"Why? I'm not angry with either of you," replied Michele, observing her attentively and wishing he could add, "unfortunately."

"I understand you," continued Lisa, "oh! how well I understand you! And that's why I feel I owe you an explanation."

Michele neither spoke nor moved. "I have to give her the impression that I'm absent . . . distant from all these rationalizations of hers . . . I have to ignore them."

"First of all," said Lisa, leaning closer and looking the boy in the eyes, "if you think there's anything between me and that man, I can assure you you're wrong. . . . We did have a . . . I might as well tell you, it's no good trying to hide it at this point . . . a . . . a relationship . . . that is, he loved me." She made a casual gesture as if to indicate that she was digging up an ancient past. "I was young, and needed help at the time. Anyway, partly because of his persistent attentions, partly because of the circumstances I found myself in, I ended up giving in to him. . . ."

"They told me you're still married," interrupted Michele, almost despite himself.

"My husband left me," answered Lisa with utter simplicity, "a

year after the wedding . . . and he took all my jewelry with him." For a moment she sat lost in thought, seeming neither sad nor embarrassed, only like someone trying to pick back up the thread of a discourse after some extremely insignificant interruption.

"I ended up giving in to him," she repeated after her pause, "and the thing dragged on for a year or so, well, for three years, until one fine day I realized I didn't love him, that I had never loved him, and so we separated. . . ."

"Actually, didn't he abandon you for my mother?" Michele felt like asking, but he held himself back; after all, what good would it do?

"After that we didn't see each other anymore except occasionally at your house, until . . . until today, when he showed up at my place with who knows what intentions . . . maybe he thought we could start up all over again." She laughed to indicate the complete absurdity of Leo's hopes. "As if I could ever forget his behavior toward me! And aside from that, as if I had no other men friends, only him . . . and all he would have to do is come over to get anything he wanted. I was just about to send him away when you arrived. . . . And that's the truth, believe me, I can swear it to you on all I hold most sacred. . . ."

Lisa stopped speaking and looked at the boy with supplicant, anxious eyes. Michele had lowered his head and was contemplating his hands. "Yes, in fact," he said at last, lifting uncomprehending eyes and a vaguely preoccupied face.

In fact what? What did "in fact" mean? Did he mean to say, "In fact you didn't betray me"? or "In fact you have betrayed me"? These two words threw the woman into confusion; leaning forward, still filled with the emotion of what she had been saying, she looked at Michele as if she wished to read the explanation of his response in his face. But the boy had retreated into complete immobility and indifference; his eyes shone stonily; it seemed that he had never spoken.

Disappointed, Lisa drew back and sat upright; various fears reared up to cross paths in her mind. "He doesn't believe me," she thought — she could have wrung her hands, she was suffering so

— "but it's the truth." Some moments passed as they sat in this embarrassing silence; then the woman laughed.

"Poor old Leo!" she cried. "This isn't a good day for him. He's quarreled with me and with you . . . not even counting your mother, since that's normal. . . . Oh! How many failures!"

And she laughed nervously, falsely; between the trills of her laughter, she observed Michele and saw his incomprehension redouble. She laughed; the living room was full of shadows; the piano's two lightbulbs, screwed into two white stems like candles, illuminated the gleaming, oblong lid and looked like two torches on a coffin. She laughed until the laughter died in her throat before Michele's motionless face and, yes, vaguely pitying expression, which she could read and which signified clearly, "I'm here against my will with a crazy woman, so what I need to do is listen to her, always agree with her, and above all, make an effort not to irritate her." And because of Lisa's desire for loving understanding and her hunger for passion, nothing could have been more atrocious than his willful coldness.

Then Michele said, "Certainly, things could have gone better for him."

This response stripped Lisa of her last illusions; a passionate, bitter disappointment invaded her being. "He's taking revenge on me," she thought. "He believes I betrayed him and he doesn't even want to listen to me now, and he's answering me like that, like an idiot."

Michele was there in front of her, there was no doubt of that, and that purity and sincerity she had hoped to rediscover through him had not deserted those eyes and that forehead. Her passion was real, it truly existed, and it seemed to her that if she could only find the right words she would surely convince him.

"Look, Michele," she pleaded, leaning forward toward him again, "it's not my fault if you found me with Leo . . . he came over. And how could you believe, after what happened between you and me in the morning, that I could throw myself into another man's arms that same afternoon? And also, look, it's absolutely impossible that I should love Leo: he's coarse, he's

materialistic . . . you're judging me wrongly, you have to rethink this. You think I'm frivolous, how shall I put it? easy, I'm telling you, that isn't true . . . I'm not like that at all. I need something more, if you only knew how much I've longed for it . . . for something that wasn't only appearance, body, physical, but also . . ." She stopped suddenly, gazing at Michele. "And in you, see," she added slowly, in a softer voice, bringing her face close to the boy's, "it's there, you have this thing, and that's why I respect you and love you. . . ."

"You couldn't get much more up front than that," thought Michele. He made no response except to draw his head back a little and observe Lisa, more in embarrassment than in disgust. She was leaning her whole upper body way out of the armchair, and doubled over like that, she seemed to be bursting out of her too-tight dress; pulled up in the back, her short skirt revealed a large, womanly thigh encircled by a pink garter. This last detail struck him: "I really shouldn't throw her away," he thought, "Leo was right." But immediately, partly because of the sense of falseness her speech had inspired in him, partly because of the baseness of his own thought, he was invaded by a revulsion so strong that his lips began to tremble. "This isn't it," he thought, "this can't be it." He lowered his eyes and drew back even farther.

"No, don't look at me like that!" Lisa cried out in fright even before he spoke, having noticed his brief, positive arousal at the sight of her nudity, then seeing him withdraw, more rigid than before. "Don't be like that . . . so closed . . . I'm begging you, say something to me . . . tell me what you truly think."

A silence followed. For the first time since he had come in, Michele heard the rustle of the rain splattering against the closed shutters, and it made him remember Leo and the two women back at the hotel.

"What I truly think?" he repeated at last, without a shadow of irony. "I think they're not back yet, I think it's bad weather, that's what I think."

Silence. She remained as she was, folded up on herself; there was nothing to say; every attempt had failed, there was no remedy

for it. She stared down at Michele's shoes and it felt like her mind was going dark. "It would have been better," she surprised herself by thinking, "if I hadn't rejected Leo . . . at this point at least I'd have him."

Meanwhile, the shadows in the room were growing deeper, swallowing walls and furniture, thickening, lowering on the two, darkening all around them; a cavern took shape, rudely sculpted out of the darkness, its vault low and sooty, its light very faint; and folded in on themselves in this moribund halo, the two black figures sat vigil over the coffin, and the false torches wavered, reddened, dimmed . . . and finally went out.

"Now what's the matter?" asked Lisa, a discouraged voice in the night.

"Nothing's the matter," came the reply. "The rain has cut off the power. We just have to wait."

Silence; darkness; the rustle of the rain. Then Michele felt a hand touch his own, felt his own mouth stretch in a pitiless smile. "This is the perfect moment," he thought, "the perfect moment to forgive, forget, and in the Propitious Darkness abandon ourselves to sentiment."

But his oppressed imagination rejected sarcasm, sought out a pretext, in the caress of those fingers, for his fantasies of passion: to touch Lisa in that black night, press her to his breast, and lose himself at last in a sincere, unrestrained kiss. . . . He struggled for a moment with his weakness; the shadowy images of desire flickered behind his eyes: a vision of Lisa and, more precisely, the memory of her naked thigh, on which his lust was focused; and another, of that man and that woman he had glimpsed inside the car. "Why isn't Lisa that woman?" he asked himself. "Why am *I* not that man?"

He could hear the rain falling on the villa walls; the darkness was unrelieved; the stupid, zealous hand kept up its hot caress. Michele didn't dare repulse it and lose it; he counted the seconds and thought to wait just a minute for the light to come on and separate them. "O hand," he invoked, straining to smile, "wait a while longer . . . at least long enough to salvage appearances." But the

light didn't come on; the minute passed by; then, fully realizing the absurd weakness of it, the boy bent down and kissed the hand.

"It's all over now," he thought immediately afterward, at once contented and revolted, "now I'll sit her on my knees and kiss her on the mouth." And he was just about to carry out this plan when a sound of voices and laughter reached them from the hallway. The living room door opened and the shuddering gleam of a candle flame tore open the darkness, making the whole room waver; gigantic shadows leapt up against the ceiling, alternating with vivid flashes of light; followed by Leo and Carla, his mother came into the room.

They approached with small, hesitant steps, obviously making an effort to recognize the two sitting there. Leo was holding the candle in his hand, and his red face stood out clearly, splashed with light; the mother and daughter stood one on either side of him and were only half-illuminated; they came forward cautiously, followed along the walls and on the ceiling by their enormous shadows.

"Oh! It's you!" cried the mother at last, recognizing Lisa.

"Still here?" asked Carla in turn. "Has the light been off for long? We've been dancing and having so much fun . . . just think, Leo taught Mamma how to dance the Charleston!"

"And how well she did!" said Leo.

"Ah, Merumeci, don't talk to me about that Charleston," sighed Mariagrazia, sitting down and looking very tired. "Just think," she added, turning to Lisa, "at a certain point he shoves me to one side, starts to kick his legs around, and says to me, 'Do like I do.' At first I didn't want to, then I started to imitate him, and in five minutes I knew how to dance it better than anyone else in the hall. It's not actually very difficult, your Charleston."

"Come on . . . I wouldn't say that you really knew how to do it. . . ." observed Carla.

"What do you mean?" protested her mother, offended. "Listen, I could do it again right now . . . there's nothing to it."

"But Mamma," insisted Carla, "you can't learn it in that short a time."

"Is that so?" her mother retorted, extremely irritated and jumping to her feet. "All right, I'm going to go right ahead and dance it here so you can see . . . just to show you I'm not in the habit of telling lies, like you are."

She took off her cape and hung it over a chair.

"Lisa, please, would you play a Charleston?" she asked, turning to her friend. "You'll find one somewhere in that pile of dance tunes on the piano. . . ."

Lisa got up and Leo followed her with the candle in his hand.

"What do you want?" Lisa asked, leafing through them in the wavering light of the candle stub. "'On the Transatlantic'? 'A Night in New York'?"

"That's it . . . 'A Night in New York,'" said Mariagrazia.

Lisa sat down at the piano and began to play, while Leo stood beside her to give her light; enveloped in the shadow of the opposite wall, Michele and Carla looked on, motionless and mute.

The easy, discordant music broke into the silence.

"All right!" encouraged Leo.

Staring attentively at her feet, the mother began to dance. The candle threw a dim, uncertain light on her painted, congested face, furrowed with loose wrinkles; the dress she was wearing was tight, and at each of her jerky movements her breasts and hips strained the shiny material; she flung her legs here and there, making an effort to stay with the rhythm and keep her knees close together; but evidently she had forgotten Leo's lessons, because at a certain point she stopped and looked at her lover with a face full of disappointment.

"I don't know . . . this wasn't the song they were playing at the hotel," she said. "I don't know how to dance to this one."

"As you can see, Mamma," said Carla, emerging from the shadows, "I was right."

"Not at all." A vivid discontent washed over her mother's illuminated face. "The tune wasn't the same. . . ."

"You chose it yourself," observed Lisa, turning around on the piano stool.

Leo advanced, candle in hand, into the dismayed and irri-

table circle the other three made. "It doesn't matter . . . it doesn't matter," he kept saying in a conciliatory tone, "we'll do it another time."

All five of them fell silent for an instant, looking at each other. The rain must have grown harder; they could hear it pouring down ceaselessly between the gusts of wind rattling the shutters. Then Carla spoke.

"We should go and get dressed," she said. "It will be suppertime soon."

"You're staying to eat with us, aren't you, Merumeci?" asked her mother, who wanted to wrest an appointment out of her lover for the next day at all costs.

"No . . . that is, yes. . . ." replied Leo.

They headed uncertainly, one after the other, toward the door; the mother was holding what was left of the candle, saying, "Follow me if you love me," and Carla was laughing. But before walking out, Leo went up to Michele, who had remained seated, and asked, "So? Did you do what I told you? Remember, don't underestimate Lisa . . . she's fat but she's expert." He winked broadly at the silent, indifferent boy, then caught up with the others. The candle flame leapt up one last time to light the lintel of the door and was swallowed by the night of the hallway; Michele could still hear their voices, his mother's among them, ordering: "Carla, open the door." He continued to sit in the dark in the armchair.

The rest of them climbed up the stairs together, bumping into each other and talking. In the anteroom of the second floor, Carla found two more candles in a drawer; her mother appropriated them and dragged Lisa off with her to show her the brand-new dress she had bought. "A gold fur collar," she kept saying, "you'll see . . . it's all the rage." Leo and Carla were left alone in the anteroom.

They stared at each other. A harsh, heavy excitement smoldered in the man's inexpressive eyes; he had placed the candle on the table and was now tormenting Carla's hand with his silky fingers. He liked that hand very much, because it was white, cold,

and slender; he glanced up at Carla from under his lashes with a sly and penetrant look, and his opaque imagination indulged itself in fantasies of the indecent caresses that that icy hand would learn, to its surprise, had come naturally to it. "One of those hands," he thought, "that look like flowers, they're so delicate . . . and yet to pleasure me, there's nothing they couldn't do." The more he thought about it, the more urgently he was aroused, until at last his face hardened; he let the hand drop and grabbed Carla by the waist. Evidently the girl had been thinking about something else altogether. "No, Leo . . . no, be careful," she murmured softly, fending him off, her eyes darting around the room in fear. But in the end she surrendered. And that was when Lisa walked in.

She saw them in each other's arms in the center of the room; she took a step backward and hid. When she peeked out again through the barest crack in the curtains, she saw, from the darkness in which the candle on the table had immersed her, their two heads, still merged, bending this way and that during their kiss, and their shadows leaping up, up to the ceiling in the huge silence. Her mind was emptied of thought and her heart beat hard. She stopped spying for a moment and drew back to stand, uncertain and frightened, in the darkness between the door and the curtain, then cautiously peered out again. They had broken apart and were talking.

"I thought I saw," said Leo, "that curtain moving. *Spirit* . . . ," he added, laughing, "if you're there, knock once, if you're not there, knock twice." He mimicked a medium sitting at her table, and Carla laughed reluctantly, her faintly illuminated face scrunched up and uncertain. Lisa, hiding behind her curtain, was tempted to actually knock, just to see them jump apart in terror, with red faces and staring eyes.

"Sit down here," the man was saying now, "here on my knees."

"But Leo," pleaded the girl, "Leo . . . if someone were to come in!"

"No fear." A rustle. Lisa blinked; no, it wasn't a dream; Carla was sitting on the man's knees with her head pressed against his,

sitting up stiffly at first, but then . . . and then . . . He kissed her on the neck.

"And now, Carla," said Leo gaily, "if you're here, give me a kiss . . . if you're not, give me two." There was a silence. Carla's great head drooped feebly; then suddenly she wriggled free. "No, Leo," she said, "no, Leo," she repeated, "no . . . not that." As she struggled, the gigantic shadows leapt, shrunk, and leapt up again. Then she stopped struggling. The candle shot out uneven tongues of light. The two of them were absorbed, their heads lowered together; they neither spoke nor moved; the only sound was the intermittent creaking of the couch. Lisa tiptoed in silence back to Mariagrazia's room.

Her initial astonishment had yielded to a vindicative joy. "Now I'll take Mariagrazia by the arm," she thought, "and show her what her darling Leo is *really* up to." But as soon as she entered the bedroom, the sight of her friend disarmed her, although she wasn't sure why. She found her pacing up and down with a candle in her hand, peering vainly into the mirror to gauge the effect of her new dress.

"What do you think?" she asked. She was very worried about a flaw she had discovered just above the belt, a pleat that was out of place. "I'll put a ribbon over it," she said, "or . . . or . . . Lisa, help me with this a little bit. . . ." She was turning around and around in front of the mirror in dissatisfaction. Lisa had gone to sit down in a dark corner. Now, she wasn't sure why, the memory of what she had seen hurt her heart, and she closed her eyes. "I don't know," she said vaguely.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" repeated the mother, perplexed, still examining herself in the mirror. "Here I am torturing myself and you say, 'I don't know'! What *do* you know, then?"

"I know a lot," she could have answered. But by now she no longer desired to reveal the secret she had stumbled upon. She felt restrained by a special reserve — how to put it? the reserve of dignity. Actually, she didn't want people to think that she was

revealing Leo's newest affair out of petty revenge, as a betrayed lover, and not — as was true — because of how disgusted she felt and how fond she was of Carla. So she said nothing.

"Would you put a little gold rose over it?" Carla's mother was asking, while the candle she held in her hand cast unkind flashes of light on her flabby face.

"Yes, I surely would," agreed Lisa vaguely; but she was seeing the two joined faces again and the vision was making her suffer; it was the first time she had ever felt such a thing, and her suffering was obsessive and grievous.

"And a belt," insisted the mother, "what would you say about a gold belt?" She was still preening herself in the mirror and seemed more satisfied now. "It's a really beautiful dress," she added, "but that pleat . . . that damned pleat!" Her candlelit face expressed sudden doubt. "Maybe my underwear's crooked?" she muttered interrogatively, and setting the candle stub down on the floor, she shoved her clothes up with both hands and rummaged around, rearranging her panties, her slip, and her bra. The candle guttered; black serpents of smoke writhed in the air. Sitting in her chair in the dark corner, Lisa neither moved nor spoke. Her eyes wandered from her friend's large, naked legs to the door behind which Leo and Carla were embracing. She felt oppressed by a sense of disgust (another new feeling for her), a clairvoyant disgust, which took into consideration the youth of the girl and coldly predicted ruin as the outcome of her affair. She felt no indignation, not even surprise; oh, no! after all, her own life . . . but only a vague pity, which embraced Mariagrazia, Leo, Carla — all of them, including herself. The novelty of these feelings almost frightened her; she felt exhausted; finally she experienced a hysterical longing to leave, to get out of there, to go home and think over all the events of the day by herself.

She stood up. "I'm going," she said.

The mother, who had slipped off her dress, came toward her in her camisole and panties. "Already?" she cried; but she didn't detain her, and after hugging her, she followed her to the door, lighting her way with the candle.

"So what are you going to do tonight?" she asked on the threshold.

"I'm going to bed," replied Lisa simply. She saw her friend look at her carefully, as if doubting her word.

"Good-bye, then," said Lisa, and shutting the door with a bang to warn the two lovers, she walked out of the room.

Carla got up from the couch right away and came forward to meet her. "I'll walk you down," she said, "and you, Leo, will stay here in the dark for five minutes." The light from the candle shone brightly on her round face; Lisa noticed that her eyes were troubled and weary and her cheeks paler than usual. The woman was seized by a sudden desire to speak, to tell the girl what she had seen; but Carla had already turned around and was heading down the stairs.

All the way down, at every step, this thought tormented Lisa: should I speak or not? She glanced at Carla's childish cheeks, her great head; and her compassion increased. "It's all Mariagrazia's fault," she thought, "that now this poor baby finds herself in these circumstances." They reached the atrium: should she speak or not? Lisa had never experienced such disconcerting uncertainty, nor had she ever felt so strongly this new emotion: pity. "It's not her fault," she said to herself again. She wanted to make some gesture or look at her in some way that would take her directly, without speaking, to the girl's shameful secret; but she didn't know how. She put on her hat in front of the mirror in the light of the candle that Carla was holding, never ceasing to stare at the girl.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked finally. "You don't seem like your usual self."

"Me?" Carla appeared to be amazed. "Nothing."

"Do you know you're pale?" Lisa forged ahead. "It looks to me like you're tiring yourself out too much."

There was no answer: should she speak or not? She shrugged on her coat, and when she was ready to go, she took Carla's hand; they looked at each other; the girl couldn't sustain her friend's searching glance and lowered her eyes.

"Carla," the woman said suddenly, her voice revealing how

moved she felt, "you've changed. . . . What's happened to you?"

"But . . . nothing."

Dismayed, Lisa couldn't make up her mind to leave. "Well, hug me, then," she said brusquely. They embraced; but as she was kissing those cold and, in a certain sense, unfeeling cheeks, Lisa felt terribly dissatisfied. "That wasn't the way," she said to herself in regret, "that wasn't the way I should have spoken."

They passed into the vestibule. "Remember," she added, embarrassed, "whenever there's anything on your mind, whenever you have any . . . troubles . . . you can always come to me. . . . Don't hide anything from me."

"Of course . . . of course," said Carla, almost as if she were ashamed. Lisa walked out and the door closed behind her.

The girl climbed thoughtfully back up to the second floor; Lisa's words had vaguely frightened her. "Can she have guessed something?" she asked herself, but the more she thought about it, the more impossible this hypothesis seemed to her: her intrigue with Leo was only a day old, and Lisa had been in the house only briefly. Impossible. Unless . . . unless her suspicions had been aroused last night by their inexplicable absence in the vestibule. "Anyway, by now it's too late, whether she's guessed or not," Carla concluded with either joy or regret — she wasn't sure which — "because tonight I'm going to Leo's."

She climbed the stairs slowly, and the candle she was holding followed her with its tremulous light and cast her grotesque shadow with its enormous head onto the wall. "So, now I'm walking forward into my new life," she thought, and she wished she could feel completely calm, but she couldn't; her heart was trembling, it was useless to deny it, and a sensation of uncertainty, even agony, oppressed her. "May these hours pass swiftly," she thought, heaving a deep sigh, like a child, "may this night pass swiftly — that's all I ask."

In the dark anteroom the light of her candle revealed Leo deep in his armchair. Carla set the stub on the table and sat down beside him.

"What a bore, isn't it? this light that won't come back on," she

started, just to say something. But the man didn't answer; he grasped both her hands. "So tell me, are you coming tonight?" he asked, but Carla had no time to answer; the curtains of one of the five doors opened and Mariagrazia came in.

She was carrying her own candle with her and had wrapped her body in a large black shawl; a malignant expression was on her illuminated face.

"Lisa has left," she said to her lover, without sitting down. "Perhaps, Merumeci, you would have preferred me to invite her to supper, isn't that right? But what do you want? You can't always have everything that you wish for . . . and besides, this way your dear friend will have time to prepare herself for your nocturnal . . . visit."

She underlined the word "nocturnal" with a repressed chuckle, and without waiting for a response, she headed downstairs.

"Where are you going, Mamma?" yelled Carla, getting up.

"I believe it's time for supper," answered her mother, without turning around, descending slowly, step by step, one hand holding her light and the other gripping the wooden railing, "but Merumeci, if you want to run after Lisa, don't stand on ceremony. . . . It makes no difference to me."

The light disappeared and the darkness returned; the last of her words were snuffed out on the other side of the landing, behind the corner of the narrow stairway. Carla, who had been watching this descent, turned around.

"It's useless," said Leo from his armchair. "Your mother is what she is . . . when she gets an idea into her head, no one can take it away from her." He said no more but made a definitive gesture. For a moment neither of them spoke; worried, almost frightened, Carla looked at her lover.

"Do you know what I think?" she began at last. "That Lisa has guessed something."

"How? Why do you say that?"

"I don't know . . . from her tone of voice when she was talking to me."

Leo made a contemptuous gesture. "As far as I'm concerned, she can guess whatever she likes," he said, trying, in one swift movement, to pull the girl to him; but without knowing why, she resisted. "No . . . that's enough now," she protested, pushing her hands against his shoulders.

"Come on," pleaded the man, lifting an excited face from the shadows and trying to hold onto the girl by her hips. "What's it to you? Just a little . . . like before."

"No. . . ." She struggled with unusual violence, her eyes filled with anger; at a certain point she bumped into the table, and the candle set on its edge fell to the floor and blew out. Deep darkness followed, and after a precipitous and disorderly descent down the stairs, there was silence.

"What a strange girl," thought Leo, left alone in the dark. "First she wants me to take her clothes off . . . five minutes later she won't even allow me to kiss her on the forehead." He wasn't irritated, just a little surprised; by now his lust had cooled down. Casting searching glances into the surrounding shadow, he rummaged through his pockets for a box of matches and lit one; then he bent down, picked up the candle, and held it to the flame. "And now," he thought, "let's go eat." He straightened up and took a few steps, but suddenly recalled that he had forgotten to tell Carla the time and way they should meet that night to go to his house. Returning to the table, he set the candle back down and wrote slowly and methodically, in that uncertain light, with his big gold fountain pen on one of his business cards: *I'll be waiting for you with the car, an hour from now at the garden gate.*

"I'll slip it to her just as I leave," he thought; after which, deeply satisfied, he picked the candle back up and went down the stairs.

Only one candle was shining on the table, which was already set. The room was almost completely dark. Although Michele, Carla, and their mother were sitting at their places, the new arrival could see nothing of them except for their dimly lit faces; he sat down in turn and began to eat in silence. The entire first course was consumed like that, with nobody saying a word, all

four of them gazing at the shuddering flames of the candles; not a sound to be heard; each of them was uneasily turning over a fixed thought in his or her mind. But the most absorbed and worried of all was the mother, without any doubt; she was leaning her chin on her hands, two bitter lines framed the corners of her mouth, and she was following the silent movement of the two flames with a glassy-eyed stare.

Finally she decided to look at her lover. Then a bitter impatience and violent sarcasm distorted her face. "I'd really like to know," she began in an obstinate voice, addressing herself to all four of them without distinction, "why there have to be such *liars* in this world . . . that's it . . . that's what I'd like to know. So people do certain things, I concede that they may do certain things, but then to hide them, and lie, and make a travesty of the truth . . . that's what drives me out of my mind."

Silence. No one wanted to assume the responsibility of encouraging her any further by an incautious response. She looked at them one after another, as if daring them to speak, but Leo and Carla lowered their eyes and Michele turned his aside. Thus, after the indirect attack, she decided on the direct one: "For example, you," she said, turning toward her lover, "are more than welcome to have a commitment after supper, no one forbids it, although, of course, leaving the house one's been invited to as a guest right after eating is grossly bad manners. . . . But why, instead of telling the truth, why invent a whole heap of lies — that you have a reception you simply must go to, that you've been invited by Smithson, who happens to be in Milano, et cetera, et cetera? Tell me something: who's making you do it? Who asked you to tell so many stupid lies? This is not only mendacity, but it's also an insult to me, as if I were such a fool that I couldn't understand certain things. And instead it would be so much simpler to tell the truth: You know, dear lady, that at such-and-such an hour I'll have to take my leave because I'm going . . . to see such-and-such a person. . . . I would have said to you: go ahead, go where you want. . . . Go to the devil if that's what excites you . . . it would all be so simple."

She fell silent and refused, with an irritable gesture, the plate the maid was holding out to her in the darkness; her agitation was extreme and her hands were shaking; she kept picking up and laying back down the silverware and the glasses with mechanical motions.

"Say something!" she shouted, seeing that Leo hadn't made up his mind to speak. "Talk! Lay it out on the table once and for all, this famous truth!"

The man looked sidelong at his lover; her insistence was beginning to annoy him. "She deserves to be slapped around for two hours nonstop," he thought, observing her stupid, middle-aged face with hatred. "At least two hours." But he served himself and replied, through clenched teeth, "I have nothing to say."

Nothing could have exasperated Mariagrazia more than this indifferent response.

"What!" she cried. "I accuse you justly of lying and you not only don't tell me the reasons for your behavior, but you even answer me rudely . . . as if *I* were the one at fault! Do you want to know what you are? Insolent!"

It was not Leo's habit to respond to his lover's reproofs; but this time, whether the excitement the girl had aroused in his body had inspired an unusual nervous impatience in him, or whether the insult had really wounded him, he was offended.

"Listen," he said roughly, turning away all of a sudden from the tray the maid was offering him, "shut up about this once and for all, or I'll be forced to *really* be rude to you. A little's all right, but this is too much! I won't take it."

And he stared at his lover with such a hard and hate-filled scowl that it took the wretched woman's breath away. Burning unevenly, the two flames of the candles cast light and shadow, shadow and light, on the rage contained within the man's jaws, on which, beneath the shaved, rosy skin, she could see the twitching of the impatient nerves; at the corners of his eyes, whose irritated pupils were fixed on her face, were two brutal furrows of weary sensuality; the scornful, violent sneer on his lips was clearly meant to hold back the abuse he would like to have hurled at her

and was emphasized by the cone of shadow concealing his chin. Mariagrazia, stunned, frightened, stopped dead in the middle of her indignant speech, stared at that pitiless face, which was like a kind of catapult striking her full in her own, and her body shuddered; a sharp sense of unhappiness, of the absolute lack of goodness and love, wrung her heart, suffocating her. "Lulù, don't look at me like that!" she wanted to scream, and then cover her face with her hands; instead she sat without moving, in terror. "I love him . . . and this is how he responds," her bewildered voice echoed over and over in her empty head.

Then she saw Leo turn and tranquilly spear two huge slices of meat and some vegetables from the platter and put them on his plate. There was nothing more to say; it was irreparable. Her eyes filled with tears, she set her napkin down on the table and pushed herself up weakly. "I don't feel like eating," she said, "you all go ahead and finish." And she almost ran out of the room, tripping on the rug in her flight.

Silence followed this unexpected departure. Leo, who had already grabbed up his knife and fork, remained with them in his hands, suspended in the air, his astonished face turned toward the shadow of the door through which Mariagrazia had vanished; Carla, too, directed wide eyes at the doorway; then Michele, who had been the least surprised of the three, addressed himself to the man.

"You shouldn't have talked back to her like that," he said, without any irritation, in the tone of someone who is simply very bored. "You know how impulsive she is. Now we'll have to hear about it forever. . . ."

"Who said anything to her?" replied the man forcefully. "If she's got a case of the nerves she should cure them . . . now we can't even talk around here."

"You two talk too much, and that's the truth," said Michele, looking Leo in the eyes. "Way too much."

"Nonsense," grumbled the man, shrugging his shoulders. "Your mother talks too much, that's a fact, but me . . ." He fell silent for an instant, looking now at the plate on which the tasty

food was cooling, now at the door through which the mother had disappeared. "So, anyway," he added, "what's to be done? She won't really want to go without supper."

A moment of silence; then Carla threw her napkin down on the table.

"Michele's right," she said to her lover. "Merumeci, you shouldn't have treated Mamma that way. She may have her defects but she's still a woman, after all . . . and you were wrong to be so rude." She got up and stood there for a moment, lost in thought. What she was about to do was repugnant to her; she suffered, and impatience added to her suffering.

"I'm going to see if she'll come back," she said at last, and pushing back her chair, she went out into the hall.

In the hallway it was pitch black; she groped her way forward, touching the wall. "I should have brought a candle," she thought. She recalled that after an earlier, similar scene, her mother had gone to take refuge in the living room; as she was thinking about this, she took another step forward and tripped so abruptly on a rug that she almost fell down. An acute irritation with her mature, yet still childish mother washed over her: "This all has to end," she thought, clenching her teeth, as she placed her hand on the doorknob of the door that led to the living room. "This very night I'm going to Leo's, and all this will be done with." It seemed to her that the darkness filling her eyes had somehow also entered her soul. "So let's go find my mother, the stupid fool," she thought; she felt cruel, yet profoundly saddened by her cruelty; she bit her lips and went in.

As she had foreseen, her mother was huddled up somewhere in the living room; in fact, Carla could hear her not far away in the darkness, weeping and sighing, "uuuh . . . uuuh . . ." and every so often blowing her nose. The girl's irritation gave way to a milder feeling. "Mamma, where are you?" she asked in a clear voice, walking forward in the darkness with her arms open.

No one answered her. Finally, after bumping into the furniture a number of times, she touched her mother's shoulder; she must be sitting, as far as Carla could tell, on the couch in the

corner. "What are you doing here?" she asked her, shaking her softly and looking up toward the invisible ceiling as if they were not in darkness and she didn't want to watch her mother crying. "Come back . . . let's go."

She felt a shrug. "Eat by yourselves . . . I'm not coming," she heard Mariagrazia's voice say.

Carla sighed, partly from impatience and partly from sorrow, circled the couch, and sat down beside her mother. "Let's go, come on, come on back," she said, laying her hands on the weeping woman's shoulders. "I swear, Mamma, that Leo had no intention of . . . that he's the most upset of all about what happened. . . ."

"Oh, my God, how unhappy I am," her mother whined in answer, in a childish and bitter voice.

Carla shuddered. "Come on, Mamma," she repeated, more uncertainly.

The couch creaked, two arms encircled the girl's neck, and she felt her mother's wet cheek against her own. "Do you really believe," asked the tearful voice, "tell me, do you believe he's really gone back to loving that woman?"

"Who?" asked Carla, greatly distressed; she felt those soft and heaving breasts pressed against her arm and she didn't know what to do; it repulsed her to have to console her mother, as if it were an unnatural act. "If only she'd at least stop crying," she thought.

"Lisa. . . ." sobbed the voice. "Didn't you see how they left together last night? I'm sure, I'm so sure that they've gone back to being lovers again. . . . Oh! How miserable I am!"

"It's me he loves," Carla wished she could answer; but then, was that true? She was seized by a sudden disgust for everything that was happening around her.

"What have I ever done to him?" Mariagrazia's voice was lamenting in the dark. "What have I ever done to deserve all this? I sacrificed my whole life for him . . . and now, look, you see how he treats me. . . ."

Carla wished she were a thousand miles away.

"I don't know anything," she said at last, and she was about to

free herself of her mother's embrace when, down at the other end of the room, the two little torchlights of the piano came on, as if someone had quietly flicked the switch.

The shadows dissolved, and immediately and instinctively the mother broke away from the daughter, bent over, and blew her nose; Carla stood up.

"Is my hair mussed?" asked Mariagrazia, getting to her feet. "Am I very red?"

The girl looked at her. The woman's cheeks were streaked with pale lines, her hair was in disarray, her nose was red and her eyes were small, as if she were suffering from a bad cold. "No, no . . . ," she said, "you look fine."

They left the living room and went into the hallway, which was also lit. Mariagrazia tidied herself up as best she could in front of one of the round mirrors and then followed Carla into the dining room.

The lights were on here, too, and Leo and Michele were sitting across from each other, conversing placidly.

"In business," Leo was saying, "it's hard to get ahead. People who don't understand it need to put their money in the hands of people who do." But as soon as he saw the two women, he turned away from the boy.

"So, we're still friends, aren't we, Signora?" he said, standing up and going over to Mariagrazia.

"Up to a certain point," she replied with ostentatious coldness, and went to sit down in her place.

The rest of the supper was quiet; each of them had a dominant thought and none of them spoke.

"She can go to hell," Leo was saying to himself, looking disconcertedly at Mariagrazia; although he was indifferent to the woman's attitude, this unusual level of rancor boded no good.

Meanwhile, the mother was trying to think of a way to avenge herself on Leo; her sorrow had passed, leaving behind an arid resentment. "He wants so badly for me to give him the house directly," she came up with triumphantly at last, "that I'll put it up for auction instead." She was ignorant of the true value of this

speculation, just as she was ignorant of the true value of the house, but she vaguely imagined that, aside from wounding her lover, she might also gain a thousand or so more lire by selling it that way.

Carla was thinking of the night to come and was in extraordinary turmoil. "Did I really promise him?" she was asking herself. "Is it really tonight that I have to go?"

And as for Michele, an acute discomfort was tormenting him; he felt that his attitude during the quarrel between his mother and Leo had been the height of indifference. "Another good occasion lost," he said to himself, "to fight with him, to break it off."

8

THEY LEFT THE DINING ROOM AT LAST, walking in measured steps, lighting cigarettes and looking at themselves sidelong in the hallway mirror, and went into the living room.

"This evening," said Leo at once, sitting down beside Mariagrazia on the sofa, "I'm in the mood to hear a little classical music. Come on, Carla," he added, turning toward the girl, "play us whatever you want, Beethoven or Chopin . . . just as long as it's stuff from the good old days, when they didn't play those jazz tunes that give you a headache. . . ." He laughed cordially and crossed his legs.

"Yes, Carla," agreed her mother, who couldn't believe her good luck — she could take advantage of the music to speak to her lover in greater freedom. "Yes, play us something, for instance . . . that fugue . . . whose was it? Ah! yes, Bach's . . . that you played so well."

Michele, too, was infinitely pleased by the idea of music. He felt tired and irritable, and the conventional image of melody as a sweet river in which one could immerse oneself and forget had never seemed as true to him as now. "Some music," he thought,

half-closing his eyes, "and to hell with all this pettiness . . . some real music."

"It's been a long time since I played last," Carla warned them, "so you can't be too hard on me." She went over to the piano, opened it up, and looked through some scores. "A Bach fugue," she finally announced.

The first chord sounded; Michele closed his eyes and prepared himself to listen to the melody. His solitude and those conversations with Lisa had awakened a great need for company and love in his very body, a desperate desire to find, among all the people in the world, a woman he could love sincerely, without ironies and without resignation: "A true woman," he thought, "a pure woman, not phony or stupid or corrupt . . . to find her . . . yes, that would put everything back in its place." So far he had not found her, didn't even know where to look for her, but he had a partly ideal, partly concrete image of her in his mind, along with the other figures in that fantastic, instinctive, and sincere world in which he so much wanted to live. Music he thought, would help him reconstruct that beloved image . . . and, in fact, due more to his own exaltation and desire than to the music itself, it began to take shape between him and Carla from the moment she played the first notes: a young girl — he could tell that by the slender shape of her body, by her eyes, by her whole, utterly graceful bearing — and though she was turned half away from him, she was observing him attentively. It was an attention devoid of enticement, without a shadow of lasciviousness, oh, he could have sworn it; no, she was looking at him with the frank, amazed curiosity with which children look at their peers. "My companion," he thought; and already certain gestures — a sort of embrace, a smile, a wave of her hand — and even events — walks and conversations — had taken form to float through the desirous skies of his imagination when a low, intense muttering shattered the illusion and brought him back to reality.

It was his mother, who was carrying out her plan to profit from the music to speak to her lover.

"If you want to, Merumeci," she was insisting, staring at the

distracted man with poison in her eyes, "you can leave right away to go to your reception; there's no need for you to bore yourself here, listening to music . . . nobody's keeping you. Go . . . go on to where they're expecting you."

Leo stared back at her; he had no desire at all to fight, and he nodded in Carla's direction as if to say, "Not now . . . now we're listening to Bach."

"But yes," insisted the mother, "you're bored here, don't tell me you're not. I just saw you yawn with my own two eyes. . . . We bore you, but then again we can't exactly always get up and dance for your entertainment. So go to that place, that place where you'll be welcomed with open arms and no one will play the piano and no one will disturb you . . . go on. . . ." As she spoke, she never let go of her stupid smile; she was back in the grip, just at the thought of Lisa, of a jealousy so fierce it made her feel dizzy. "And besides," she went on, "it would be terribly bad manners not to show up at the Smithson woman's reception. Who knows how many people will be there? She probably ordered a special train just to bring her guests all the way to Milano."

Leo would have given anything to rid himself of this annoyance. He shook the ash from his cigar and turned calmly to face his lover. "If I lied," he said, "it was out of politeness to you, so that you wouldn't think I was bored in your home. The truth is that I'm not going to any reception tonight, I'm going home to sleep. . . . I've been up till all hours of the night for days in a row and I'm tired. Tonight I want to go to bed early."

"Oh, right!" cried the mother. She made a face: I know what's what! "So, you want to go to bed . . . you're sleepy, you've been up late for nights. Sure, I can see that, you're practically dead on your feet, you're so sleepy you can hardly keep your eyes open. Poor thing! If you only knew what pity I feel for you."

"I don't need any pity from anyone," replied Leo, becoming irritated despite his best efforts.

"Don't you even realize that you're telling one lie after another?" asked Mariagrazia brusquely. "First it was Smithson, now it's sleep. . . . You should be ashamed of yourself."

"I'm not ashamed, why should I be ashamed of myself?"

"Oh, do me a favor and just be quiet."

Leo shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

Michele observed them in disgust from his armchair. "The devil take them," he thought. "You can't even listen to music around here anymore. . . . They're always having one of their ugly little arguments." The young girl, his beloved, had dissolved; a jumble of notes without meaning, that was all the music was. His mother and Leo had triumphed.

"Sleep, huh!" continued his mother, talking into the man's ear. "Sleep, right? But you know what I say to you? That I know everything, do you hear me? Ev-er-y-thing! I know about last night and I know about tonight, everything."

"Actually, she knows nothing," Leo vented to himself, without turning to look at her. He blew out a cloud of cigar smoke; Carla was there, with her back toward him so that he could see the flesh of her shoulders. "What a night!" he thought. "What a night! Only a few hours to go and it feels like an eternity." His fixed, motionless eyes ignored the mother, Michele, the whole living room; desire was giving him visions. There: Carla was completely naked, sitting on that tiny stool in front of the piano; he seemed to see, in that shadowy corner, her white back split by its curved furrow, her broad, round buttocks, and now that she had turned, even her two breasts.

But the music had ended and reality returned; applauded by Michele with unusual affection, the girl asked, "Did you like it?"

"Very much, yes, very much," said Leo. "One more time, Carla."

"No, Carla," intervened her mother, "no, don't play anymore. Merumeci's not only bored, he's quivering with impatience to be out of here. . . . He's so sleepy he can't keep his eyes open, he wants to go home and sleep. So why should we detain him?" She turned to her lover. "Go on," she insisted stubbornly, plucking him by the sleeve, "go on, go to bed."

Leo liberated his arm and smiled reluctantly. A strong desire

was on him to slap his incorrigible lover hard, first on one cheek, then on the other.

Carla looked at them both. "Is it really tonight that I have to go to his house?" she repeated to herself. It seemed strange to her, seated in front of the piano, that within two hours she would be in her lover's bedroom; but since she divined the man's avid impatience, she decide to continue playing — partly to put off the final moment of surrender for as long as possible, and partly to flirt a bit to the last.

"All right," she said firmly. "Leo's not leaving, he's going to be bored for another ten minutes . . . isn't that right, Leo?" She opened a big book and began to play again with an attentive, preoccupied expression on her face.

"Ah, the little witch," thought Leo. "She wants to see me die of impatience. She wants to see me in agony." By this time music, conversation, silence — everything — had become unbearably annoying; he was devoured by lust, dominated by one desire alone: to take Carla home, to take Carla. "Who knows how long this will go on," he thought, listening angrily to the first chords of the melody, "ten minutes? A quarter of an hour? What the hell got into me? Why did I make the absurd suggestion that she play the piano?"

But Mariagrazia had not given up. She touched the man's shoulder. "And tomorrow morning," she said, with a simpering smile, as if picking up a conversation that had been interrupted, "I'm going to go see my lawyer and give him instructions to put the house up for auction."

If a brick had come loose from the ceiling and hit Leo on the head, he could not have been more disagreeably surprised than he was at the sound of these words. He face turned red, then purple; he clenched his teeth and short, staccato phrases flashed through his mind: "That's all I need, and it had to be *tonight*. . . . God*damn* her . . . these things only happen to *me*." Then he turned his whole body toward her.

"You won't do that," he said grimly, calling her *tu* in his fury

and balling his fists up against his chest in an instinctive gesture.

"Now they'll grab each other by the hair," thought Michele, observing them in disgust.

"I surely will," replied his mother with ostentatious serenity, "and I'll do it tomorrow."

"That's crazy talk," said Leo, taking one of her hands and pressing it down against the couch. "You want," he began, calling her *tu* before remembering to switch it to *Lei*, "you want to auction off the house and lose fifty percent . . . and you have the gall to tell me tonight" (*"tonight* of all nights," he repeated inside himself, with a furious glance in Carla's direction), "now that the contract is already drawn up and there's nothing left to do except sign it . . . that's crazy . . . you must be out of your mind. . . ."

"Say what you like," replied Mariagrazia, who was suddenly speaking with the imperturbable calm of a saint, "but tomorrow morning the first thing I'm doing is going to my lawyer."

Leo stared at her. Now this new trouble had been dumped on top of the irritation he was suffering due to his unsatisfied lust. His most natural instinct would have been to jump on the woman, slap her around, beat her up — maybe even strangle her. But he restrained himself. "You can't be serious," he insisted. "Think about it awhile."

"I've already thought about it."

"Look, Mariagrazia," began Leo, calling her *tu* again, but consciously this time, "don't get so rash on me here. You should never act on impulse when you're dealing with business matters. Besides, if you want . . . do you want to get together tomorrow afternoon?"

"It's no use," answered his lover less firmly. "I think it's better if I just go see my lawyer."

"You stupid, ugly woman!" Leo wanted to scream at her; but he joined his hands together instead. "Mariagrazia, auctions are risky," he pleaded, "and your lawyer could be a swindler, the world's full of them. And you're a woman, it's easy to cheat you out of things you don't understand. . . ."

"Do you think so?" asked the mother with an uncertain smile.

"I'm sure of it. So, it's understood . . . I'll expect you tomorrow at four."

She glanced around coyly, and her middle-aged heart was quivering. "Do you love me?" she wanted to ask him. "Tomorrow," she repeated instead, "no, tomorrow I can't."

"The day after tomorrow, then."

"Wait," she whispered, gazing into the air as if trying to recall something, "yes, I have an appointment, but I'll put it off . . . all right, I'll come . . . but don't think," she added, with a dazzling, flattering smile, "that you can convince me." She was silent for an instant, hesitated, then finally took one of her lover's hands in her own; and she was just on the verge of asking him, in a whisper, "Do you love me a little?" when the music stopped abruptly and Carla turned around.

"It's useless for me to play," she said calmly, "since everyone's talking . . . everyone's arguing. . . . It would be better, really, to go to bed."

The two on the couch became aware of their compromising position; the mother let go of her lover, drew back, and looked at her daughter with dismayed eyes.

"If you want to talk," added the girl, "don't ask me to play."

Silence.

"We were just commenting on your music," replied Leo at last. "You play so beautifully, Carla — continue, please go on."

This new lie was the signal for a sort of rebellion, as if they had all been suddenly woken up out of their long torpor. And first among them was Michele, who had suffered his mother's dialogues with Leo in silence up until now; partly from anger, partly from an instinctive need for action, he picked up the newspaper lying open on his knees and hurled it forcefully to the floor.

"That's not true at all!" he yelled, looking at Leo. "It's a barefaced lie! You two were thinking about the music about as much as I . . . as I was thinking about becoming a priest! You were talking about business deals, lawyers, and . . . ," he forced himself to laugh, "and of altogether different things."

There was a silence.

"Hooray!" Carla shouted suddenly, clapping her hands. "Hurray for the truth! Finally we can breathe."

It was as if someone had thrown the window wide open and the cold night air had invaded the room. For a moment they all looked at each other's faces in astonishment; but the first to come to was Leo.

"You're wrong," he said to Michele severely. "Obviously you didn't hear us correctly."

The boy broke out into high, unpleasant laughter, inspired by the brazenness of Leo's lie. "Hah! Hah!" he laughed, throwing himself back in his armchair. "This is great!" Then he stopped. "Liar!" he said abruptly, his face serious.

They stared at each other; Carla held her breath; the mother paled.

"I say," shouted Leo suddenly, bringing his fist down onto the table, "this is too much!" But he didn't get up; he remained seated, staring at the boy with inquisitorial eyes. "I never knew you to be so quarrelsome," he added; and then, after an instant, "and if you continue, I'll be forced to pull your ears."

He offered up this last phrase in the most stupid and solemn way; and it seemed to Michele that Leo's threat, begun so proudly, had weakened little by little to fall at last to the flat vulgarity of pulling his ears. And in answer his own feeling diminished; there was nothing to do; he could neither throw down the gauntlet in challenge nor flaunt his offended honor; it would be enough to hide his threatened parts — his ears! — and that was too little.

"Pull my ears, pull *my* ears? *My* ears? *My* ears?" Every "my" pushed him closer to action, but he felt cold and indifferent. The words coming out of his mouth were false, his voice was false; where was the fervor? where was the scorn? Somewhere else; maybe they didn't exist.

Among the flowers, cups, and coffeepot on the table there was a marble ashtray, white alabaster veined with gray. Michele stretched out a somnambulist's hand, picked it up, and threw it weakly across the room. He saw his mother clasp her hands to-

gether and heard her scream; Leo was yelling, "This is crazy!"; and Carla was clearly upset. He realized, then, that the piece of marble had gone astray, that instead of hitting Leo it had hit his mother . . . on the head? no, above the shoulder.

He stood up and awkwardly approached the couch, upon which his victim was lying. His mother had an uncertain expression on her face; for some reason she was keeping her eyes closed and sighing at intervals. However, it was evident that she was feeling no pain and that this fainting fit of hers was entirely imaginary. Michele kneeled down with the others; although the sight should have saddened him, he felt no remorse, and in fact he couldn't manage to stifle a sense that the whole scene was ridiculous. In vain did he think: "This is my mother . . . I've struck her . . . I wounded her . . . she might have died"; in vain did he search himself for a little affectionate pity for that motionless figure, lost in her errors; his soul was unmoved. He bent to look at her more closely. Without changing position or opening her eyes, his mother lifted a languid arm and with drooping fingers pulled her dress away from her shoulder, which appeared: nude, fat, but without the slightest trace of a contusion or bruise or red mark — nothing. However, her fingers, as if unsatisfied, continued to pull down the dress, baring her arm and revealing her armpit. It was extraordinary: spread out on her bosom, which grew ever larger and whiter as the dress was brought down to reveal the cleavage of her breasts, the immodest fingers seemed to be pursuing a purpose of their own, completely unrelated to showing her wounds — more like undressing.

In truth, all this soft abandon was directed at her lover so that a romantic compassion would open his heart and fill it with pity. "He'll see me wounded and fainting, with my breasts bared," she was more or less thinking, "and he'll remember that I shielded him, that I took the blow of the ashtray that was meant for him, and he won't be able to help feeling a deep and grateful tenderness toward me." Her deluded fantasy imagined that Leo would gather her up in his arms, shake her, call her by name, that he would grow uneasy, seeing that she didn't respond . . . and that at

last she would slowly come to, reopen her eyes . . . and her first look would be for her lover, and for him her first smile. But it wasn't like that; Leo didn't gather her up in his arms or call her by name.

"Maybe it would be best if I went outside," he said to Carla instead, in a voice rich with irony.

Mariagrazia felt as if she had just been splashed with a bucket of cold water, right there on the shoulder she had bared for her lover; she opened her eyes, sat up, and looked around. There was Michele, observing her with disingenuous eyes, as if his remorse were mixed with some other feeling; Carla, who was trying to pull her mother's dress back up over her uncovered breasts; but Leo? Where was Leo? Certainly not by her side: he had retrieved the ashtray and was weighing it in his hand; then he turned abruptly to Michele.

"Good," he encouraged him in an ironic tone, "good, really good."

Michele shrugged his shoulders and stared back at him. "Certainly. Wonderful, in fact," he said calmly.

The mother's voice rose sharp and familiar. "For goodness' sake, Merumeci," she pleaded, "for goodness' sake don't start up again . . . don't touch him . . . don't talk to him . . . don't even look at him. . . ." She sounded as if she had reached the extreme limits of patience and reason, beyond which lies nothing but madness.

The boy took refuge by the window. It was still raining, he could hear its rustle against the shutters and on the trees in the garden; it was raining peacefully on the houses and empty streets. A lot of people must be listening like him behind closed window-panes, their hearts full of the same anguish, turning their backs on the warm intimacy of their rooms. "It's no use," he said over and over to himself, touching the edges of the window with uncertain fingers, "it's no use . . . this is not my life." The scene with the ashtray came back to him, including the ridiculous fainting spell and his own indifference. "Everything turns into a comedy here," he thought. "It's all false, there's no sincerity. . . . I wasn't made for this life." Leo, the man he was supposed to hate, wasn't hateful

enough, and he couldn't make himself hate him; Lisa, the woman he was supposed to love, was a fake, masking her oversimple desires with unbearable sentimentalities, and it was impossible to love her. He had the impression that he was turning his back, not to the living room, but to an empty and pitch-black abyss. "This is not my life," he thought with conviction, "but what is?"

The door closed behind him and he turned around. The living room was empty; mother and daughter had gone to accompany their guest to the door; the lamp shone on the motionless circle of deserted armchairs.

"He's just a boy," his mother was saying to Leo in the vestibule. "You shouldn't take it seriously. He doesn't know what he's doing." Making a contrite face, she lifted her lover's bowler hat from the hook and handed it to him.

"He didn't do anything to *me*," said Leo jocularly, wrapping a woolen scarf around his neck. "I'm just sorry you took the projectile in question on the shoulder." He gave a cold, false, friendly laugh, looked for an instant at Carla as if to seek her approval, and finally turned to put on his coat.

"He's just a boy," repeated the mother, helping him mechanically; the thought that Leo might profit from her son's rashness to break off their relationship terrified her. "You can be sure," she added in a humble yet authoritative tone, "that nothing like this will ever happen again. I'll speak to Michele myself . . . and if necessary," she finished irresolutely, "I'll act."

There was a silence.

"Go on," said Carla, who was leaning against the door, looking at her mother attentively, "go on . . . don't get so worked up about it. I'm sure," she added, lowering her eyes and smiling, "that Leo himself has forgotten it by now."

"Exactly so," said Leo. "There are so many things that are more important." He kissed the mother's hand, but she was not yet reassured. "See you soon," he said to Carla, staring into her eyes intently; she paled and turned the doorknob with a slow, resigned gesture.

The door blew open violently, banging against the wall as if

someone anxious to enter had pushed it from outside with all his might. "Ugh, what cold! What damp!" cried Mariagrazia. As if in answer, an impetuous gust of wind blew through the room and an angry rain pelted down on the shining tiles; the lamp swung from side to side, and one of Michele's lightweight coats hanging from the coatrack struck Leo's face several times with its long, empty sleeves. The women's dresses billowed out, swirled, and lifted, finally gluing themselves, heavy with rain, to their legs.

"Shut it . . . shut it!" shouted Mariagrazia, pushing at the door with both hands and leaning forward ridiculously, keeping her feet together, so that she would not get any wetter. Carla hopped cautiously across the flooded floor like an aquatic bird. "Shut it!" repeated her mother; but no one moved: they were all staring in astonishment at the invisible violence that was roaring, moaning, shrieking, and sobbing on the empty threshold. Finally the other door of the vestibule blew open as well, and a kind of whirlwind formed and plunged down the hallway, engulfing the house. They could hear, now closer and now farther off, all the doors slamming, with a strange banging noise quite different from the sound of a door slammed shut by an angry or distracted hand — a noise in which the voices of the wind mingled with the bumpings and pauses that seemed to prepare the way for the last and strongest blow of all; the high, empty rooms echoed; the whole house shuddered as if at any moment it would detach itself from the ground and fly away swiftly on the phosphorescent crest of the clouds, whirling like a mad top.

"And now?" Leo asked the mother once she had finally managed, with great effort, to shut the door. "Now what do we do?"

"We wait" was the answer. All three fell silent. Mariagrazia looked at her lover with bitter, disenchanted eyes; his haste hurt her. In a little while Leo would leave her; he would vanish into the rainy night, leaving her to her cold house and her empty bed; he would go somewhere else, to Lisa's house, for example, yes, surely, to Lisa's house, where he had been awaited for so long. Who knew how much fun those two would have tonight, who knew how hard they would laugh at her! So she made one last try: she cocked her

head and assumed the expression of someone who is listening to something. "I think," she said, "that something's banging in the living room." Then she added impatiently, "Carla, go see."

"I don't think there is," said Carla after a moment. "I don't hear anything . . . nothing at all."

"I tell you, there is," insisted her mother obstinately, anxiously. "Listen," she added, speaking into the most perfect silence, "do you hear how it's banging?"

Then Leo laughed. "No," he said tranquilly, cheered by the stupidity of his lover, "no, nothing's banging." He saw with renewed pleasure the pained expression in the woman's eyes. "An illusion," he concluded, taking up his bowler hat once more, "an illusion, dear lady."

"Are you going?" asked the mother.

"Certainly. It's time."

"But . . . isn't it raining too hard?" she insisted, lost to reality, placing herself between her lover and the door. "Wouldn't it be better if you waited a little while longer?"

"It's raining," replied Leo, buttoning up his overcoat, "the way the doors are banging." He kissed the hand of the woman he had just annihilated, rummaged in a pocket to find the gloves that were in the other, and went to the door and opened it, holding it with one hand against the wind. "See you soon, Carla," he said once again to the girl, shaking the hand she held out to him. He smiled and left.

They went back to the atrium and the mother shivered. "What cold . . . ugh! What cold!" she repeated. The tired muscles of her face were sagging; it was as if she had come undone. Her bewildered eyes lighted now on one object, now on another, at random, wavering and wandering; an unadorned nakedness spread over her heavily made-up face, and her mouth was imperceptibly trembling. "I'm going to bed," she said, climbing the stairs slowly and holding onto the wooden banister. "I'm going to bed," she repeated, "goodnight." Her shadow leapt up to the ceiling, halted on the landing, slid along the wall in an oblique movement, and disappeared.

* * *

Carla, left alone in the atrium, went over to the lamp; something crackled in her closed fist, a business card of Leo's, the card he had pressed into her hesitant fingers during their long last handshake. It was brief:

I'll be waiting for you with the car, an hour from now at the garden gate.

And it even bore his signature: *Leo*

She headed up the stairs, feeling disconcerted. "An hour from now," she repeated to herself, "can I really be going, an hour from now?" Stair by stair, she reached the narrow landing and looked up: the anteroom, in which she could glimpse an armchair and one corner of the couch, was empty; and a homey, tranquil silence inhabited its shadows and its close, still air; an hour from now Michele and her mother would be immersed in sleep, without a doubt. She climbed the rest of the way up the stairs and went directly to the door of her bedroom at the end of the dark hall. As soon as she walked into her room, she was struck by its warm and intimate appearance: everything was in its place, the lamp with the pink shade was lit, her sky-blue voile nightgown was draped over the bed, and the sheets were folded open and down. Everything invited her to sleep; all she had to do was undress, slip under the covers, and close her eyes.

Whether it was the sight of her bed, which, together with the torrential sound of the downpour against the shutters, filled her with a great longing for safety and rest, or whether it was truly weariness from the day, she was suddenly assailed by a cowardice so persuasive and a repugnance so strong for the adventure she was headed toward that she frightened herself. "Let's see," she thought, "to sleep, to rest . . . all right, but then what? Tomorrow morning I'd find myself at the same point all over again . . . and then how am I ever going to be able to have a new life?"

She crossed the threshold and approached the closet mirror to look at herself, now stepping forward to see herself closely, now stepping back to see from afar. She thought her face looked in-

flamed, right up to her sparkling pupils, but when she drew close she discovered, between that fiery flush and her eyes, deep black circles that troubled her with a feeling like guilt; yet if she stood back, she seemed no more than a young girl dressed for a party, her hands joined in her lap, her great head inclined toward one shoulder, her eyes sad, her smile embarrassed. Nothing more; as much as she wished to penetrate the mystery of her own image, she could not.

She turned away from the closet, took a few steps around the room, and sat down on the bed; a slight anxiety was keeping her from thinking. She felt ready, curious, and impatient, the way she felt when she visited someone and was waiting, pacing and looking around, for that friend to come in, smiling; that was all. She was sitting with her legs crossed and her head bent down and had the distinct impression that she was meditating profoundly; but her eyes kept returning to certain fixed distractions, so that she realized, when she looked up and saw herself in the mirror, that she hadn't been thinking at all, and in fact, couldn't think.

She sat like that for a few minutes; there was no longer any question of sleeping. She vaguely admitted, inside herself, that she was going to surrender to Leo that night, but she didn't know when; and it seemed to her that that moment was, luckily, a long way off yet. "How hard it's raining!" she thought at intervals, when the sound of the downpour grew louder; but it didn't even cross her mind that she would have to go out into that night and face that rain in order to meet her lover; a stuporous languor possessed her; finally, slowly but not sadly, she held her head between her hands and let herself fall backward onto the bed.

In her new position she could see nothing except the illuminated ceiling; the only sounds to reach her ears were those of the tempest-tossed night; very soon, not without repeating to herself that at a certain point she would have to get up and go, she closed her eyes and abandoned herself to a sort of fearful, diffident torpor. But the torpor turned into a drowsiness, and slowly but surely, almost without knowing it, Carla fell asleep.

It was a dreamless sleep as black as pitch, which no doubt

contributed more than a little to the later memory lapses and distractions of that night. And in this absence of dreams, the duration of her lethargic nap deceived her, so that she woke up suddenly without reason, frozen with terror, unable to breathe, suddenly aware that she had been sleeping.

"I fell asleep," she thought, horrified, sitting up in the bed and staring around her at the peaceful, gently illuminated room. "Who knows what time it is . . . two or three o'clock . . . and Leo will have left, he will have waited and then gone away. . . ." For a moment she thought she would burst into tears from regret and desperation. "I fell asleep," she repeated, this time aloud, gripping her head between her hands and looking at her image with its tousled hair and terrified eyes, in the mirror: "I fell asleep!"

She got up and ran to the clock that stood on the bureau: only three-quarters of an hour had gone by. The clock read quarter to twelve.

It seemed impossible to her; she thought the clock had run down and held it up to her ear; it was ticking; it was true, she could still go meet Leo. Without knowing how to explain it to herself, she felt almost disappointed as she put the clock back.

But now another doubt rose up to haunt her: how and when was she supposed to meet with her lover? She remembered the phrase "an hour from now," and while she hadn't forgotten that the car would be waiting for her at the gate to the garden, somehow, now, she didn't feel completely sure. "The card," she thought all of a sudden, "where is the card?"

She looked around, searching, but didn't see anything. She looked on the bureau among the knickknacks: nothing. She went to the bed and shook it and turned over the pillow: nothing. An unreasoning haste and anxiety seized her: where was the card? She started running around the room, throwing things in the air, dresses, clothes, drawers . . . . Finally she stopped and stood still in the middle. "All right," she thought, "I read it down in the atrium, but I had it in my hand when I came in, so it has to be here, calm down, it has to be here." Like someone trying to capture some small and agile animal — a mouse or a butterfly — she searched

slowly and meticulously, knelt down to look under the furniture, twisting into strange positions to avoid getting dirt on her dress, squashed her forehead and cheeks to the dust on the floor, peered into the darkness of closet and drawers. Every time she stood back up she felt a nervous exhaustion course through her limbs, and she closed her eyes and stood still, her hands held open in a desolate gesture, thinking obscurely that this sad search must be expiation for some forgotten fault; and each time she knelt down again, she wished she could break, so that she could lie on the floor like an object that has fallen and smashed.

With childish scrupulousness, she searched even in the most absurd places: the embroidery basket, the face-powder box. But she found nothing. Dazed and exhausted, she sat back down: what kind of writing was it that vanished as soon as you read it? The same fabulous unreality that exists in dreams invested her memories with that impalpable atmosphere of certain swift and extraordinary words and actions that make one think, afterward, "Did they happen or did I imagine them, did I dream them, did I make them up?" That handshake and that piece of paper had interrupted the continuity of habit for only one difficult-to-recognize instant, and then everything had gone back to the way it always was; now, in her confusion, Carla wanted to see what Leo had written again. What she lacked was not the memory of having received the card, although even that was vague, but the clear and certain knowledge of what it had contained. She had touched it, she had seen it and read it, but she hadn't had time to convince herself of it; so now she doubted it.

And what had been written on it? Exactly an hour, or more or less? Tonight or tomorrow night? And wasn't it too late by now? And wasn't it raining too hard? And wouldn't it be better just to go to bed and sleep and go on with her ordinary life the next morning? As she sat slumped and motionless, time was passing, passing; the force of her doubts was so great it made her feel like committing suicide, killing herself with her own hands.

She came to when the sharp strokes of the clock announced it was midnight, and she had her first practical thought: "I'll go. If

he's not there, it will mean I was dreaming." She looked at the clock face and calculated that Leo must have been waiting for her already for a quarter of an hour. She was seized by an absurd urgency and ran to the window, gluing her face against the black glass to see if it was still raining; she listened and looked; nothing; the night refused to reveal itself to her, and behind her back the bedroom opposed her ironically, offering up its white illusions and the indifferent light of the lamp. "Rain or no rain," she thought furiously, "let's put on a raincoat." She ran to the closet, dragged one out, and put it on in front of the mirror; then she bent over and tightened her garters; she powdered her face, ran a little lipstick over her lips, combed her hair, and grabbed a hat at random, pulling it on roughly to cover the nape of her neck "like American girls," she thought, looking at her round forehead and the curls escaping from the hat's tight brim. She rushed around searching, searching: "Those damned gloves!" She was no longer thinking, only living; a mechanical haste had abolished all humanity in her. She ran over to the clock with the same unreasoning fury that made her scream at the maid, in a flurry of bare arms, stockings, and hair, "Hurry up! it's late, it's late!" when she was getting ready to go out for a visit. She looked at the clock: "Ten minutes passed already! Quick! Quick!" She opened her door and suddenly, artificially, restraining her own impetus, tiptoed out into the hallway.

The anteroom was empty but lit up, and everything was in its place, armchairs and couch; without making a sound, Carla took the house keys out of the drawer in the table. Then, with a thousand precautions, supporting herself now against the wall, now against the banister, she descended the narrow stairwell. The wooden steps creaked under her feet, and the next flight down, which she could just discern from the landing, was almost completely lost in the shadows; she could barely make out the brown carpet that snaked down its steps; the atrium was dark. She turned on a light and walked down the hall between the two rows of mirrors; in the vestibule she pulled an umbrella out of the stand and went out.

It was raining hard and the night was black and wet; the monotonous sound of the downpour reached her from every direction. Carla walked down the marble front steps and opened the umbrella with a gesture so familiar it amazed her, as if, she thought, in certain extraordinary circumstances everything should be done differently than usual.

She felt she was not attributing quite the sad and shameful importance to her flight that others, in her place, might have given it. Here she was: going out, crossing the path, hunched under her umbrella so she wouldn't get drenched in the driving rain, trying to avoid the puddles; she was crossing the park at that late hour without fear, without wonder, without even the vast and adventurous sorrow that might accompany such a grave action; the soaked gravel crunched under her feet and she was enjoying the sound of it — that was all.

Raising her eyes, she saw in front of her the black shape of the gate, the two white pillars, and the dark foliage of a large tree drooping under the rain. She opened the little service gate and slipped through into the street, glancing in the direction opposite to where Leo was waiting for her. "He's not here," she thought in disappointment, gazing at the tranquil light of the arched streetlamp on the wet and empty pavement; but already her lover's automobile was approaching her from behind, less rapidly than the sudden blaze of its headlights.

Farewell streets, deserted neighborhood invaded by the rain as if by an army, villas sleeping in their damp gardens, long treed avenues and parks in tumult under the downpour; farewell high, rich neighborhood! Sitting motionless at Leo's side, Carla watched in a daze as the rain wept violently in intermittent spurts against the windshield, causing all the lights of the city, the electric signs and the headlights of cars, to drip and melt beyond the glass. Street followed street; she watched them fold and flow into one another, turn and twist in front of the car's moving hood; and at intervals, as it came to a stop or jerked forward, black facades detached themselves from the night, slid by, and disappeared into the darkness like the flanks of ocean liners navigating with

difficulty through the breakers; black groups of people, illuminated doorways, streetlamps, everything, as they journeyed, swam up for an instant and then vanished forever, swallowed up by the dark.

Motionless and enchanted, Carla looked now at Leo — his hands resting on the steering wheel, his calm, reflective way of driving — and now at the street; every detail fascinated her; her mind was empty. So when, after ten minutes, the car suddenly stopped and the thought came to her, *we're here*, it affected her so strongly that for a moment she couldn't breathe.

But Leo got out and instructed her, "Wait here." She saw him, through the wet glass of the windshield, open something black that looked like a gate and then disappear into the darkness of the garden. "He has to put the car away," she thought, and in fact, the sound of a garage door rolling open reached her through the rain. Then Leo reappeared, got back in, and, without paying even minimal attention to her, drove the car forward over the drenched gravel and then into the dark cavern of the garage: stench of gasoline and oiled steel; a little red lantern in a corner. They both got out and, with some effort, rolled down the door together, after which Leo meticulously fastened the padlock.

A round lamp to the right shone on the front of the building, with its four low marble steps and its closed double doors; Leo threw them open and pushed Carla into the lobby. In contrast to the dark, rainy garden, everything here was colored and bright: a wrought-iron lantern hung from the ceiling; the walls were whitewashed with yellow wainscoting; several green palm trees stood in the corners; everything was new. There was even an elevator in its cage, but they preferred to go up by the stairs.

They climbed two flights in silence. On the first landing the sound of a phonograph playing erupted out onto the shining tiles along with a confused, intimate, gay hubbub of voices and feet.

"They're dancing," said Carla, leaning on the banister and forcing a smile. "Who are they?

"We're dealing here," replied Leo, bending over to scrutinize the brass plate on the door, "with . . . the honorable Doctor In-

namorati, who," he added, partly to cheer Carla, partly to deceive his own impatience somewhat, "is at home with his lovely wife and young children to host, in impeccable style, a select company of ladies and gentlemen from the highest circles of society." He laughed and took Carla's arm. "Let's go," he said, "one more flight and we're there."

As they continued to climb, they could hear the music from the phonograph, still loud although farther away, echoing up the bright, white, empty stairwell; in its pauses the silence was complete. Then Carla could imagine the little living room, the dancers standing momentarily still under the lit chandelier, the laughter and movement and, in the corners, behind the window curtains, the ingenuous compliments. . . .

On the third-floor landing they were there; they went in.

Leo took off his hat and overcoat and helped Carla out of her raincoat in the vestibule, which was vast and white, opening out into three different doorways. Facing the front door was a large, dark, rectangular window, which no doubt overlooked some inner courtyard.

They went into the living room.

"Let's sit down here," said Leo, pointing to a large leather sofa scattered with cushions. They sat down: a lamp with a red shade set on a low table illuminated their bodies up to the breast, leaving their heads and the rest of the room in the half-light. For a moment they sat motionless, without speaking: Carla was looking around without curiosity, her eyes wandering from the bottle of liqueur on the table to one wall or another, like someone not really observing but anxiously awaiting a word or a gesture; and Leo was admiring Carla.

"All right, my dear," he said at last, "what's the matter that you're not talking or even looking at me? Come on, be brave, tell me what you're thinking. . . . And if there's anything you want, don't stand on ceremony, ask for it, make yourself completely at home." He stretched out a hand and brushed his fingers in a caress across the girl's face. "You're not sorry, are you," he added, without a shadow of embarrassment, "that you came?"

She turned her head. "No. . . ," she answered. "No, I'm . . . very happy . . . only, can you understand? I have to . . . get used to it."

"Get used to it, get used to it," said Leo, sure of himself; he moved even closer to Carla than he had been. "Damn!" he thought, aroused and excited, "what a bore these preliminaries are!" He put an arm around her waist, but the girl seemed unaware of it. "What a pretty little dress you're wearing," began Leo, in a low, caressing voice. "Who made it for you? What a beautiful child you are . . . and you'll see, we'll be so happy together . . . you'll be my little girl, the only little girl in my life, my precious little girl."

He stopped speaking and brushed his lips swiftly over Carla's hand and bare arm, lingering for a moment on her neck. Then he pulled her big, serious head toward him; they kissed; they broke apart.

"Sit yourself here," invited the man, pointing to his knees. Carla obeyed with docility, and as she settled down on him her dress uncovered her legs. But she made no move to smooth it back down; and this nonchalance convinced Leo at last of the solidity of his conquest.

"What room's over there?" asked the girl, pointing to the other door in the living room.

"The bedroom," said her lover, observing her attentively, then embracing her again after a moment. "But forget about all that," he murmured in a persuasive voice, "and listen to me . . . tell me . . . do you love me?"

"And you?" she asked in a whisper, gazing at him with grave eyes.

"Me? What do I have to do with it? Of course I love you, if I didn't I wouldn't have done what I did. Sure I love her, my Carlotta, my little doll, my Carlottina," Leo purred, entangling his fingers in her hair. "I love her very, very much and no one's going to take her away from me . . . and I desire her, too . . . yes . . . all of her . . . I want these lips, these cheeks, these lovely arms, these beautiful shoulders, this body of hers so full of . . . femininity, so

delicious, so full of fascination and grace that . . . that . . . it's driving me mad!" he finally exploded, and as if seized by a sort of frenzy, he threw himself onto Carla, embracing her with all his might, and fell on top of her on the sofa.

The indifferent light from the lamp illuminated the man's straining back, his jacket pulled tight across it, and Carla's legs, encased in pink stockings. They struggled together for a moment as Leo, throbbing with lust, stammered out confused, broken endearments. But Carla said nothing; her attitude in the midst of this fury was docile but not resigned and her thoughts less lucid than she had foreseen they would be. A shamed and disordered excitement began to make her cheeks burn; in fact, it was useless to hide it from herself, Leo's caresses were not leaving her entirely indifferent, and a pleasure made even sharper by her awareness of its absurdity swept over her, stealing into her conscience like fog. "Let me see," she thought, between the instinctive shudders her lover's cruel and lascivious embraces were wresting out of her body, "what am I doing?" Never before had this affair of theirs appeared to her in so commonplace, unforgivable, and disastrous a light; "a new life," she thought weakly, and then closed her eyes.

Leo, lost in lust as he was, knew better than to go beyond certain limits. For him, seeing Carla abandon herself and close her eyes, looking white as wax against the dark background of the leather couch, and thinking, "No . . . I can't take her here . . . but . . . in there . . . it's too uncomfortable here," was too much. He pushed himself up and helped her to her feet, and for a moment they stood still, panting, not speaking. The lamplight left Leo in shadow, leaning on the back of the couch, and illuminated Carla, who already looked very different from the young woman she had been only moments before: her hair was tousled and wild and a lock of it hung down over her eyes; her face was flushed, grave, and excited; one of the two little straps of her dress had been broken in the embrace and now hung down in two narrow strips, one on her breast and one on her naked white shoulder. Then, while she was staring dazedly in front of her, the man noticed a strange thing: something very like a cartouche folded in

four nestled beneath her dress in the cleavage between her breasts, poking the red silk with two or three sharp points. He smiled, stretched out his hand, and touched it.

"And what's this?" he asked without any real intent, out of pure curiosity.

Carla turned a frightened face to him. "What, this?"

"That . . . piece of paper you're holding so jealously between your breasts," insisted Leo, with an almost paternal smile.

She lowered her head and brought a hand to her breast; there was no doubt about it, her lover was right: something very much resembling a piece of paper was hidden there, between her blouse and her flesh; however, she didn't remember putting it there and didn't understand what it could be; she raised her eyes and looked at her lover in dismay.

"The place all little girls keep their secrets," said Leo, feeling both tender and aroused by the idea of such a hiding place. "Let's see it, Carla, let's see this secret of yours." He reached out and tried to slip his hand under her dress.

"I won't let you!" she cried suddenly, without even knowing why, covering herself with her hands.

The man's smile disappeared. "All right," he said, observing the girl attentively. "I'll let you not let me. So take it out yourself, this treasure of yours . . . and then read it aloud."

Silence; Carla looked at her lover. Half-irresolute and half-disoriented, she knew intuitively that this matter of the piece of paper was beginning to irritate him; she could see it in his eyes, which had turned hard; and she was tormented herself by not knowing what the stiff paper her curious fingers were touching could contain. But she didn't pull it out, partly from a sad tenacity (what if it really *were* some secret of hers that she shouldn't confide to anyone?), partly in the vague intention of discovering how Leo would act when jealousy stung him.

"What if I," she said at last in a challenging tone, placing her hands squarely on her knees, "what if I didn't want to show this letter to you?"

"Ah! It's a letter!" exclaimed Leo, interested and already un-

easy. "And from whom, if you don't mind? What person is so important that you have to keep it there, right *there*, and can't leave it at home?"

She gazed at him through half-lowered lashes, leaning her great, tousled head to one side, over a naked shoulder. "This," she answered, assuming a capricious expression, looking up and drumming her fingers gently on her knees, "this is not something I'm going to tell you."

"She's capable, very capable," thought Leo, greatly irritated, "very capable of having someone else . . . very capable indeed." He rose slowly from the sofa. "Listen, Carla," he said, articulating his words very clearly and fixing her with two imperious, inquisitorial eyes, "I absolutely want to know who wrote that letter."

She laughed a little, amused by his jealousy, but didn't relax her scornful, capricious expression. "Guess," she said.

"A man?" asked Leo.

"Of course," she teased, "of course, unless it's a woman." To keep him from making some abrupt gesture to grab it, she placed one hand over her breast; she looked up and her eyes, turned toward the shadowy ceiling, drooped halfway shut; she felt tired; she wished she could bow her head over this secret that didn't exist and go to sleep.

"I get it," said Leo with a strained smile, "I get it. Some lover . . . some handsome young boy. . . ."

"Not a chance," she replied, without lowering her head. "A man." She watched Leo's broad, vague shadow on the opposite wall moving back and forth as if he were getting ready to pounce on her.

"A man," she repeated, in an even wearier voice, without ceasing to tap the fingers of one hand on her knee. "And if you knew," she added, intoxicated now with a nameless sorrow, "if you only knew how much I love him!" Her eyes brimmed with tears beneath their lids and her heart trembled. "And instead," she thought coldly, "this man doesn't exist."

"A man . . . accept my congratulations." Now Leo was really annoyed. This purity of hers that didn't exist, this conquest that

others had already made, put the devil into his body; the chaste and childish Carla of his desires yielded its place to a signorina, expert in love, who did not hesitate to visit men in their homes; the tickle, the perfume, the bloom of the idyll vanished, and his amour propre as a seducer was left with empty hands at an open door. "It's my fault," he added aloud, in conviction. "I should have known it wouldn't be the first time."

"The first time for what?"

"The first time that . . . you know what I'm saying . . . that you've made a visit, that you've gone home with somebody."

A hot flush rose to Carla's cheeks; she stared at her lover, torn between a desire to protest and reveal the stupid truth and the temptation to continue the fiction she had begun; and at the last, she took the second path.

"And what if that were true?" she asked, looking into his eyes.

"Ah! So it's true?" For a moment Leo clenched both his teeth and his fists; then he mastered himself and said in a voice strident with sarcasm, "Ah, so, purest of maidens, you have a lover. . . ."

"Yes," she confessed, blushing again. The tone of the man, his irony, hurt her very soul; never before had she felt such a great need of kindness.

"Well, great, well, *bravissima*," said Leo slowly, looking straight into Carla's eyes but seeming to speak to himself, "that's right, I should have known . . . like mother, like daughter." An abrupt red rage suffused his eyes with blood; he grabbed the girl by the arm. "Do you know what you are? a . . . a . . ." — in his fury he couldn't find the right insult, so he stammered — "a shameless . . . a slutty . . . and even so, you came home with me?"

"This is something else altogether," replied Carla calmly.

"What trash . . . what a disgusting . . . and to think she's barely twenty-four years old," Leo said to himself, looking at the girl. "And might I at least know who this gentleman is?" he asked.

"He's a tall man," she said, forcing herself to concretize the vague, ideal image toward which her soul was drawn, "and he has chestnut hair . . . and a beautiful calm forehead, and an oval face, not red, rather pale . . . he has very long hands."

"Santore!" cried Leo, naming the first of Carla's friends he could think of who even remotely resembled the portrait she was painting.

"No, it's not him." Carla gazed into the air in front of her. "If only he were real," she thought, "I wouldn't be here." She was silent for a moment and then went on. "He loves me very much and I love him very much," she continued, with a slow, easy sweetness that astonished and enchanted her, since now she didn't even feel that she was lying. "We met two years ago . . . and since then we've been seeing each other steadily. He's not like you . . . he's . . . above all, he's *good*, I mean he understands me even before I speak, and I can confide in him, I can tell him everything I'm thinking about, anything at all . . . and he talks to me like nobody else does, and he takes me into his arms and . . . and . . ."

Her voice trembled and her eyes filled with tears. In that moment she herself was convinced of what she was saying; she seemed almost to see him, right there before her in flesh and blood, this creature of her imagination. "And he's truly different from all the others, and there's no one but him that's ever really loved me," she concluded emotionally, somewhat stunned by her own lie.

"His name," said Leo, completely unaffected by her words and tone. "Would it be possible to *know his name?*"

Carla shook her head. "No. His name, no."

A moment of silence. They looked at each other.

Then: "Give me that letter!" the man ordered peremptorily.

She covered her breasts with both hands in distress. "Why, Leo?" she pleaded.

"The letter. Out with the letter!" Suddenly he grabbed her by the waist and tried to shove his hand into her hiding place by force; but Carla twisted free and, panting and rumpled, ran over to the opposite wall.

"Don't you know you can't get anything by force?" she yelled at him, and opening the door to the bedroom, she disappeared.

Seized by an almost limitless fury, Leo hurled himself against the closed door; but Carla had turned the key on the other side

and he couldn't get in. "Open up!" he shouted at the peak of his rage, pummeling it with his fists. "Open up, stupid!"

No response.

It came to him suddenly that he could enter the bedroom by way of the bathroom. He ran into the vestibule and from there into the bathroom; everything was in its place, and the nickel-plated pipes and shining majolica tiles shone in the shadows. He realized joyfully that the door with its green panes of glass was half-open.

At first he didn't see Carla. The light was turned off and a thin darkness filled the bedroom. "Could she have thrown herself out the window?" he thought for a second, without knowing why, as he blundered his way through the dark. When he switched on the light, he saw that the room was truly empty. "The devil take her — where in the world could she be hiding?" he asked himself, and he was about to leave and go look for his fugitive in the other rooms of the apartment when he suddenly saw her there, standing huddled behind the bathroom door.

He simply went up to her, grabbed her by the arm, and dragged her out of her hiding place with a certain degree of violence, as if she were an unruly child.

"Out with this letter," he said grimly, holding her tightly.

They stared at each other. Now the thought that her lover would find her out in her lie frightened and humiliated the girl; she knew that the piece of paper could have no importance whatsoever, that it must be a visiting card or something stupid like that, and she suffered at the thought of being constrained to confess to the man that her dreams, in reality, did not exist. So she made one last stab: "This isn't right, Leo . . ." she began, in a querulous voice, "I . . ."

"The letter!" ordered the man for the second time.

She understood then that it was useless to rebel. "It will be what it will be," she thought in resignation, and even felt somewhat interested herself in what the letter might contain; dipping her hand between her breasts, she pulled out the piece of paper and offered it to the man.

"Here it is."

Leo took it, but before examining it he looked at the girl. Then — who can say why? — it was as if an insurmountable shame had suddenly assailed her: her face contracted abruptly, and she turned around, went over to the bed, and threw herself down on it, hiding her face in her hands. It was only a gesture, unaccompanied by any real thought or feeling; she herself was not deceived into thinking that it had meaning.

All of a sudden she heard the man laugh, and she lifted her head to look at him.

"But it's *my card!*" he cried, coming toward her. "*My* card, that I gave you today."

She was not surprised; at bottom, that story about the letter had been absurd, since no one could have written it to her, there was no one who loved her. . . . Nonetheless, it felt cruelly unfair that it should be so — unfair, this absence of the miracle (why couldn't this great desire she felt change that stupid business card into a love letter?) and unfair this meticulous reality; she paled.

"Of course, your card," she said, with a sense of bitter and inevitable disappointment. "What did you think it would be?"

"But then," he went on, approaching her and sitting down on the bed right beside her, "then *I'm* that man . . . chestnut hair, calm forehead. . . . It's *me* that you love."

She looked at him for a long time, as if she were trying to glimpse in that red and self-satisfied face the beloved image of her dreams. "Well . . . well," she said, hesitating and lowering her eyes in the awareness of lying all over again, "didn't you understand that yet?"

For the first time since she had known him, Leo burst out into a fresh, spontaneous, almost youthful laugh. "No, I didn't!" he shouted, taking her by the waist. "Let it be as if I had never said any of the things I said, yes," he repeated, "as if I had never said them." He leaned over and kissed her on both shoulders, on the neck, on the cheeks, on the breasts; her body began to excite him again; with his illusion he rediscovered his lust.

"My little liar," he said, "my lovely little liar. . . ."

These affectionate outbursts lasted no more than a minute; then he got up awkwardly from the bed. "And now?" he asked, half-seriously, half-facetiously, his mussed hair spiking out and making him look either crazy or drunk. "Don't you think it's time to go to bed? I'm sleepy . . . terribly sleepy."

Carla forced a smile and nodded timidly in assent.

"Good girl," said the man. "Here are some pajamas." And he showed her what looked like a rag with big stripes draped over the headboard. "There are toiletry things over there on the wardrobe if you need them. . . . Get undressed and go to bed and I'll be out in a minute."

He smiled at her again, completely self-confident, slapped her on the shoulder, and disappeared into the bathroom.

9

THE BED WAS WIDE and low and occupied an inner corner of the room. She lay down on it and looked around: in the half-light unbroken by the single lit lamp by the bedside, she could glimpse two wardrobes with gleaming mirrors, one on the right of the door to the living room and one on its left. There was nothing else. A low, rectangular window with little panes took up the entire opposite wall; the half-curtains were a stark white; beneath the window, the radiator was hidden by a kind of grill; the blinds were drawn; the door to the living room was shut, as was the door to the bathroom, which she could glimpse out of the corner of her eye, its glass panes blandly illuminated like the sides of an aquarium when the sun beats against them. She lowered her eyes: a big bearskin, thick-furred and white, lay at her feet; it had yellow celluloid eyes and a wide-open mouth full of sharp teeth; the flat skin of its short paws and slender tail made it look like a giant steamroller had flattened it that way, leaving nothing intact except its ferocious head.

She stood up, took a few mechanical steps around the room, touched the heater, which was warm, pulled aside one of the

curtains, and then turned around: behind the luminous panes of the bathroom door, the shadow of her lover was passing back and forth; she could hear a jet of water pelting down, and other sounds. . . . Turning again, she glimpsed her disheveled, frightened reflection in the dark wardrobe mirrors; she went back to the bed and began to undress.

She wasn't thinking of anything; the unusual actions she was engaged in absorbed her completely, putting her into a dreamy stupor. The thing that struck her above all was not being in her own house, finding herself in that room at that hour. She took off her torn dress and draped it over the low armchair at the foot of the bed; her stockings, and contemplated her bare legs for a moment; her slip, her underpants; she hesitated — did she have to take off her undershirt, too? She thought about it. Yes, of course, it was necessary; she slipped it over her head and threw it down with her other clothes. She didn't feel naked until she was under the cold sheets, where she curled up against the wall with one hand between her legs and the other over her breasts. She had hurled the pajamas with the big stripes onto the floor; they made her think of a prisoner's uniform, and besides, it occurred to her that her mother might have worn them.

Little by little her hot body warmed up the sheets. At one point she had the impression that this warmth had dissolved the knot of fear and stunned astonishment that had blocked and entangled her spirit up until now; she felt so alone that she experienced a great wave of tenderness and indulgent pity for herself, and she tried to hunch up and curl around herself as much as she could, so that her lips were touching her rounded knees. The healthy, sensual scent her knees gave out moved her, and she kissed them passionately over and over. "Poor little thing . . . poor little thing," she murmured to herself as she kissed them. Her eyes filled with tears; she felt like bowing her head on her own soft breasts and weeping onto them as if they were the breasts of a mother. Then, still staring with wide-open eyes at the wall barely lit by the lamp, she listened: the sounds that came to her were familiar and revealed irreparably where she was — the rain was still falling, she

could hear it dripping; someone was walking around in the bathroom, and water was running; if she moved, the bed sank gently beneath her with a muffled, almost faraway sound, either from some memory or just the extreme give of the feathers. It wasn't her bed in her house, which was hard and narrow; it wasn't one of those strange beds on which you throw yourself after a long journey only to realize immediately that it's either too high or too low, and on which you sleep without satisfaction. No, this was a comfortable, extremely tender bed, full of attentions and solicitude; it was just that her body was afraid of it and huddled up on itself and shivered, and every once in a while reached out a hesitant hand to explore the immense, arctic spaces behind her, that Siberia of cloth, uninhabited and hostile. It was an unpleasant sensation, like walking down a dark street knowing that someone's behind you.

She closed her eyes wearily. It was only a minute, but it seemed like an hour that she had been in that bed. "Why doesn't Leo come?" she asked herself suddenly. This thought dragged others behind it: "I'm not turning around till he turns off the light," she said to herself, but without any hatred. "I don't want to see him."

She shivered. "It's the end," she thought distractedly, unconvinced. Now that desire for destruction, which had borne her as far as this bed, gave birth within her to yet another, avid desire for the darkness in which she would shortly be embraced by her lover; she imagined, not without excitement — whether from some instinctive longing for pleasure or because of her objective of utterly abasing herself she didn't know — throwing herself, amid the shadows and promiscuity of that night, into all the most bestial excesses that, without knowing precisely what they were, she had long guessed the existence of. But these aroused fantasies could not distract her from *waiting*: "Why doesn't Leo *come?*" she repeated to herself at intervals. . . . And afterward, broken and exhausted by this unbridled lust, she would fall asleep beside her lover; this idea pleased her, she wasn't sure why, and already she was thinking that it must be both sweet and sad to sleep with

someone else, one beside the other, maybe even embracing, united and naked, in the night; and at this thought she almost felt some affection for Leo, and imagined how she wouldn't move, how she would even hold her breath, so as not disturb him or wake him. . . . And the bathroom door opened, with a tinkling of glass.

Because of the anxiety that had ended up invading her, she was grateful at that moment for the sudden but familiar sound, as if for a friendly presence in an unknown or frightening place; with just that sound, and in just that way, glass-paned doors the world over opened, in her own house and everywhere else as well. She forgot all her plans on the spot; her eyes flew open; she saw the man's broad shadow on the wall, and she turned: her lover bent down over her.

She had just time to realize that he wasn't wearing pajamas but had on a kind of light robe, and that he was meticulously shaved, powdered, and combed. Then in one simple movement, without changing his usual hard and distracted expression, he lifted the covers and slid into bed by her side.

10

THE FIRST ONE TO FALL ASLEEP was Leo; Carla's unexpected if inexpert passion had exhausted him. After their last embrace, after they had both lain motionless for some moments with entangled, sweat-soaked limbs, eyes closed and heads together on the bolster in a kind of half-sleep, the girl felt her lover withdraw his arm very slowly from around her waist, disentangle his legs from hers, and turn his body toward the wall. "And tomorrow morning?" she thought in confusion, listening to the peaceful breathing of the sleeping man. "And tomorrow morning?" She, too, felt exhausted; it seemed to her that she had been immersed in the thick darkness of that room for a century; she had a headache and didn't dare move. But then suddenly, although she still had the distinct sensation of his naked body against hers, of those sheets full of a special warmth — so new to her — and of that impalpable atmosphere, which didn't allow her to forget even for an instant that she was in *that* house in *that* room; suddenly, all these extraordinary elements ceased to amaze her; it was as if she had acquired, in one fell swoop, the sense of it

all as a long-standing habit. She turned, drew the covers up over herself, and fell asleep.

Right away she has a strange dream: she seems to see that imaginary lover she has known how to describe to Leo so well. He is tall, maybe because he is standing up while she is lying down; he has a calm forehead and eyes at once full of serenity and indulgence. He stands very straight and is carelessly dressed, and he looks at her with attention and wonder as if he had actually entered the room right then and found her just as she is, lying naked there on the bed, her once intact body deflowered and, yes, sweaty in places — between her breasts, on her belly and arms — from Leo's recent lustful embraces. She can't see herself, she's lying down, but from the man's expression she understands that her body is marked with God knows what kind of stains and signs, and that she has changed, even for him whom she never knew, from the Carla she was before this night with Leo. They both stay like this, not moving from their positions for some moments, looking at each other. But finally the sight of that face, calm, severe, and attentive, and the torture of those eyes staring at her no-longer-virginal body (and the worst of it is that she can't see herself) become unbearable to her and with an instinctive gesture she covers her face with one arm, wanting to weep. One more unpleasant surprise: her eyes remain dry; no matter how she tries, no tears will come; she cannot cry. And yet an immense sorrow, a bitter remorse for she knows not what pierces her; she laments and cries out — or at least she feels she does, in the tangle of her dream — and although she is lying down (another torture, this: the sense of being nailed to that bed, unable to get up, unable to bend forward) she twists and turns her upper body and naked hips, and, at intervals between these spasmodic movements she is making, like a pinned butterfly, she sees, very far away at the foot of the bed that calm face and those eyes that never cease looking at her and that fair forehead. "Cry . . . cry," she repeats inside herself, trying her utmost to squeeze at least one single tear from between her dry lids, but it's no use . . . her sorrow will not be expressed; it rests like an enormous weight on her soul and will

suffocate her. At last she can stand it no more and stretches her arms frantically toward that distant face . . . and it seems to her that she calls the man by the sweetest names, new and spontaneous names that move her profoundly, and promises him she will love him all the rest of her life, always (and this sense of eternity makes her feel deeply bitter, and she doesn't know why); but in vain, for suddenly the man disappears and she falls back into the darkness. Then there bursts out, growing ever more sonorous, a single dark syllable like the tolling of a bell: "San . . . San . . . San . . . San . . . ," which strikes her soul into confusion and an atrocious fear; and then, abruptly, the name rings out in its entirety, "Santore," and she wakes up.

The same night into which she had fallen asleep still enveloped her now; her whole body was bathed in sweat, and she felt something damp and fiery hot at her side. "Where am I?" she asked herself fearfully. It was only an instant of disorientation before she remembered everything that had happened and understood that the heat she was feeling emanated from Leo's naked hip touching her own. She felt she was suffocating and threw the covers off her breasts and freed her arms from the irritating tangle of the sheets; the cool air and freedom were a great relief to her. Possessed by a nervous anxiety and fearful of another nightmare, she no longer wanted to sleep; holding her eyes wide open, she gave herself over instinctively to the reevocation of the night's events from the beginning onward.

Memories returned to her in intermittent flashes. Now she seemed to see herself in the car, gliding down the streets of the city in the pouring rain; then in the living room, sitting on her lover's knees; almost simultaneously the image of Leo loomed up, getting into the bed where she was waiting for him, and then, even stranger and more troubling, the image of both of them, naked, standing beside each other drowsy and dazed in the blinding light of the bathroom tiled in white majolica, waiting for the water to turn hot so they could wash. These so-recent memories seemed to her to describe, instead, very distant events that bore no relation to her whatsoever; they didn't belong to her, she

couldn't explain them, they were improbably, impossibly unreal. And yet there was no doubt about it — this memory, so close that the figures moving around in it appeared life-sized, was a life *she had lived*; all she had to do was reach out a hand under the sheets to touch the naked body of her sleeping lover, or switch on the light, to convince herself that she was really here, in Leo's bedroom, and not in her own. "Far, far away from my home," she thought at last, extraordinarily troubled, "here . . . in my lover's bed. . . ." But if she was astonished to recall the more mundane events of that night, the memory of certain other things — which she may have guessed at but which had definitely been unknown to her before — excited her greatly. She couldn't stop analyzing them, reconstructing them over and over; it was as if she were going back to *taste* them . . . for instance, the precise memory of certain moments of clear-sightedness, when the lamp had still been lit, in which she had surprised, just for an instant, some of their postures — hers and her lover's — so indecent, so *monstrous*, that they were indelibly stamped in her mind's eye.

But, whether it was the darkness enveloping her or a real sense of fear and uncertainty, little by little these reevocations tired her out, no longer sufficed to distract her from her present conditions. "And now," she thought suddenly, "what will happen to me?" She didn't want to admit it to herself, but she was feeling terribly lonely. There she was, lying on her back in that bed, abandoned to her solitary thoughts and fears, abandoned to her weaknesses; the night was pouring into her open eyes. Her lover was *not* caressing her forehead, he was *not* smoothing back her hair, he was *not* helping her in her agony of wakefulness, he was *not* defending her . . . it was as if he didn't exist. He was a tranquil breath in, a tranquil breath out, there to the right of her; he could be Leo or anyone else, just a body reminding her once in a while that she wasn't alone.

She felt a sudden, hysterical desire for company and caresses. "Why is he *sleeping?*" she asked herself. "Why isn't he taking *care* of me?" That lethargic breathing beside her became terrifying to her; it no longer seemed her lover who was breathing, but some

other man, unknown and possibly hostile. There was a rhythm so indifferent in that breathing, a regularity so monstrous in contrast to her anguish and spectral fantasies, that she wasn't sure, actually, whether to feel more afraid or indignant. She tried to forget about it by listening to the few sounds of the apartment — the occasional creaking of some piece of furniture, a small rustling here and there — and then opened her eyes wide in the darkness, trying to see something she could fix her attention on. But her efforts were useless; the breathing oppressed her in its almost inhuman calm. "How wonderful it would be," she thought in discouragement, "if he woke up now and told me he loved me." And she was already imagining how it would happen: he would roll back over to face her, press his cheek softly to hers, and murmur sweet words into her ear; just at the thought of it she felt deeply touched and even consoled. Then she suddenly froze in terror.

She thought she saw the bathroom door down at the end of the bed start to swing open. Whether it was that the glass panes were emanating light or that the blinds of the bathroom window had been left open, the fact is that the shadows were not so thick there as they were in the rest of the room . . . and there . . . yes, there was no doubt about it, the door was opening slowly but surely; it was moving as if someone wanted to come in and were cautiously pushing on it from outside.

Her breath caught in terror and her heart began to beat furiously in her breast; she lay frozen and rigid on her back, staring at the door, and a crazy thought (although the moment she expressed it to herself she knew it couldn't be true) crossed her mind: "It's Mamma, coming to surprise me here." The door gave a light tinkle, and this was too much for Carla; she shut her eyes, and a long, loud, lamenting wail escaped her, seeming to rip her apart.

There was a bumbling movement beside her; the light came on, and the peaceful room reappeared. Leo sat up in bed, still half-asleep.

"Eh! What's happening?"

"The door," stammered Carla, pale and panting, "the bathroom door."

Without saying a word, her lover got out of bed. She watched him open the door, disappear into the bathroom, then reappear. "I don't see anything," he declared, "it was probably just the wind . . . I left the bathroom window open." He got back into bed, pulled up the covers, and lay back down. "Don't think about it anymore, go to sleep," he said to her, "sweet dreams," and he turned off the light.

Leo's actions had been so swift and that parenthesis of light so brief that Carla hadn't had time to speak or even, with a hug and a look, express to him the extreme desire for love and consolation that was weighing on her heart; and now, after a moment of uncertainty in the renewed darkness, she began to weep. The tears streamed swiftly down her cheeks, and the accumulated bitterness of the night burst out from every recess of her soul. "If he loved me," she thought, "he would have consoled me. And instead he did nothing, just turned out the light and rolled over." Her solitude, which before she had barely intuited, now seemed inescapable to her; she covered her eyes with her naked arm and felt her face twist in a bitter grimace of sorrow. "He doesn't love me . . . nobody loves me," she said to herself again and again. She thrust her fingers into her hair and pulled it; now her cheeks were drenched with tears. At last the weariness coiled inside her won out; still crying, she fell back to sleep.

When she woke up again it was already daylight, as she guessed by the bit of light filtering through the window slats into the dim obscurity of the room. She woke up easily and immediately knew where she was. She was not surprised to find herself wearing the striped pajamas she had rejected the evening before, although she couldn't recall precisely when, in the course of the night, she had put them on; nor was she surprised, as soon as she got up and leaned against the wall, adjusting her sleep-heavy eyes to the dusty half-light of the room, to discover that dark, tousled splotch on the pillow — Leo's head. Somehow her sleep had dissipated all the fears and astonishments of the night; it was as if she

had become habituated over the course of years to waking up that way, in her lover's bed. Finished and gone were her torment, wonder, impatience; finished and gone her sad and adventurous sense of unreality. Standing there with her back to the wall, Carla *knew* — from the unusual sense of satiety, peace, and thoughtful patience that filled her — that she had truly entered into a whole new life. "How strange," she thought at a certain point, "it's as if I had suddenly become much older than I was before. . . ." She stood motionless like that for a moment, vaguely preoccupied, then leaned down and shook the man's shoulder.

"Leo," she called him, in a strange, subdued voice.

Her lover had drawn the sheets up to his ears and seemed to be deeply immersed in his sleep; at first he either didn't hear her or pretended he didn't hear her. Carla bent over again and shook him, and this time a sleepy voice reached her from the shadow on the pillow.

"Why did you wake me up?"

"It's late," she said, still in that new, low, intimate tone of voice. "It's time for me to go back home. . . ."

Without saying a word, without moving the rest of his body, Leo stretched out an arm from the bed and turned on the lamp. The peaceful light she recalled from the previous evening washed over the room, and Carla immediately recognized the furniture, the two doors, the armchair piled up with a white heap of her most intimate clothing, and herself, sitting on the bed. . . . The clock under the lamp on the bedside table read five-thirty.

"It's five-thirty," said Leo, resentfully and irritably, without turning around, "What possessed you to wake me up?"

"It's late," she repeated. She hesitated, then climbed over her lover's body and sat down on the edge of the bed.

He seemed unaware of her and made no response; evidently, she thought, he had closed his eyes and fallen straight back to sleep. Paying him no more attention at all, Carla began to get dressed.

But she had barely pulled off that repulsive uniform with the big stripes and was standing there naked, starting to slip her

blouse over her head, when all of a sudden she felt an arm grab her from behind and wrap itself around her waist. Her first reaction was terror; she dropped the blouse on the floor and turned swiftly around; then she saw her lover's sleepy, tousled head against her hip.

"Carla," he murmured, leaning out of bed and looking up at her with excited eyes still heavy with sleep, pretending to speak with an effort on account of a drowsiness he had instantly shed, "why leave so early? Come here . . . come back here next to your Leo."

She looked down into that excited face lit by the warm light of the bedside lamp, and suddenly an inexplicable suffering swelled up in her breast. "Let me go," she said in a stubborn voice, making an effort to detach the five fingers glued to her side, "it's late. It's time for me to go."

She saw the man laugh, squeezing shut his small, excited eyes. "It's never late for some things," he said.

Suddenly — for no reason, since she fully admitted to herself that her lover was prey to such urgent desires — her rage reached a peak. "*Let me go,*" she repeated harshly. In response, Leo clumsily stretched out his other arm, trying to topple her and pull her down by his side. She tore herself away from him; once freed, she walked over to the armchair at the foot of the bed and bent down, not saying a word, completely ignoring him, to pull on her stockings.

After her stockings, she put on her garters. She devoted her whole attention to this task, not raising her eyes until she was done, and then casting a hard look toward the bed; but Leo had rolled over to face the wall and seemed to be sleeping again. "Sweet dreams," she thought; it was only a second; and meanwhile, almost as if this swift irony had provoked it, a feeling of fear and insecurity wrung her heart, and after having forgotten them for hours, the old words returned to echo and echo in her head: "the new life." She leaned over and picked up her slip. "Is it possible," she thought, clutching the little rag of silk and staring into the air in front of her, "is it really possible . . . *that this is the new life?*"

She finished dressing, never ceasing to turn this question over and over in her heavy heart. Then she stood up. "Get up!" she shouted at the sleeping man, leaning over to touch him on one shoulder. "Get a move on . . . it's time to go."

"All right," came the answer. Sure that she would find him dressed when she came back out, Carla went into the bathroom.

She used Leo's comb and brush on her hair, washed her hands, and examined her pale face attentively in the mirror. "When I get home," she thought, "I'll wash myself all over . . . I'll take a bath . . . then . . . and then . . . I'll have to hustle to make my tennis date." Despite these calm and practical thoughts, however, the same sad question continued to echo in the lower levels of her consciousness: *"Is this the new life?"*

A surprise awaited her in the bedroom. Not only was Leo not dressed, but he hadn't even gotten up. He lay in exactly the same position in which she had left him and seemed still to be sleeping.

She went over and shook him. "Leo, it's late. We have to go . . . get up!"

The man rolled over, lifted his sleep-dazed face an inch off the pillow, and looked blearily at her. "Eh? Are you already dressed?"

"It's late. . . ."

"It's late?" repeated Leo, as if he didn't understand her. "So?"

"What do you mean, 'so'? You have to drive me back home."

He yawned and ran his fingers through his hair. "If you knew how sleepy I am . . ." he began, "all night long you never left me in peace for a single second. You were calling me . . . talking to me . . . kicking me . . . what do I know? I'm dying for sleep." He spoke slowly, dragging out his words and avoiding looking at the girl.

Carla, on the other hand, was observing him attentively. "Obviously," she thought with sudden clairvoyance, "it's not just because he didn't sleep well. It's mostly because I didn't give in to him a little while ago that he's pretending to be so sleepy now." She stood back up.

"If you want to sleep, Leo," she said, almost sweetly, "don't stand on ceremony. I can always go home by myself. . . ."

"Nonsense." He stretched languidly without looking at her. "Now that you've woken me up, I'll drive you home."

"I need to show him that he's wrong," she thought, watching him, "that . . . that I'm not like him." So she insisted, in the same mild manner, "No, no . . . I don't want to disturb you. You're sleepy, that's all right . . . I'd prefer to go by myself."

Leo stared at her, a little disconcerted. "By yourself, nothing," he said at last, somewhat weakly. "You say that now . . . but afterward you'll be on my case about it . . . I know how you women are. Anyway, I've already decided: I'm driving you home." He stopped and shook his head forcefully, but he didn't move. They looked at each other.

"And if I ordered you not to?" asked the girl roughly.

"What?"

"Not to drive me home."

Leo's bleary eyes widened in wonder. "In that case," he said diffidently, "it would be a whole other question."

"All right," said Carla, calmly adjusting the belt of her dress, "I order you."

There was an instant of silence. "First you wanted me to drive you home," said the man at last, "and now you don't. What kind of game are you playing with me?"

"Ah! It's me that's playing games," thought Carla, clenching her teeth. She sat down on the edge of the bed by her lover. "It's not a game," she answered him, "but I was thinking that if you drove me home it could be compromising . . . if they saw us together . . . Michele is probably already up. Understand? It's better if I go alone. I know the way, I'll be home in ten minutes . . . and you . . . you'll be able to sleep."

They both fell silent and stared at each other. Now, after that momentary upsurge of desire, Leo really did feel very sleepy; nothing seemed more repugnant to him than getting up and having to go out with Carla, maybe in the rain. And he would have to get the car out of the garage. . . . He smiled at her, stretched out a hand, and caressed her cheek.

"Actually," he said, "in spite of all your fussing, you're still a great good girl. Can I seriously let you go by yourself?"

"Of course," she said, standing up; Leo's tone was irritating her. "I don't need you to go, in fact I beg you not to."

"Well, anyway," said Leo, as if he were talking to himself, "you can see that I insisted right up to the last . . . if I don't drive you home, it's not because I wanted to sleep, but as you said yourself, because I could compromise you . . . so don't try to hold it over me later. . . ." But then he stopped himself. Carla was no longer in the room, she had already gone to put on her hat. "All the better," thought Leo, "it's good for me and it's good for her . . . this way we're both happy."

She came back in after a moment, wearing her hat and raincoat and carrying her umbrella. Looking preoccupied, she pulled on one glove and then searched through her pockets for the other, but couldn't find it. "*Pazienza*," she said at last, "I must have lost it. By the way," she added without embarrassment, approaching the bed, "can you give me some money for the taxi? I don't have any."

Leo's jacket was draped over a chair near the bed; he reached out an arm and pulled a handful of silver coins out of one of his pockets.

"Here," he said, giving them to her.

She put the coins in her own pocket. "I'm already beginning to make money," she couldn't help thinking. But then she leaned over the bed and said almost affectionately, as if to compensate for her wicked thought, "I'll see you later today, dear." They kissed.

"Make sure you shut the door," yelled Leo.

He watched her walk cautiously out and waited for a moment to hear the door slam, but not a sound reached him. He switched off the light and, rolling over to face the wall, fell back to sleep.

II

In Leo's sleep the squalid figures of the dawn, characters found only in those dreams dreamt in the morning while the sun is shining and light filters into the disordered room from every direction like water leaking into a sinking ship, made their entrances and exits: Carla, her mother, Michele, all of them moving around sensually, even obscenely. But their bodies were paling, as if the outside light were causing them to fade, and Leo, asleep, was making every effort to hold on to them. "I musn't wake up," he repeated to himself subconsciously, "I musn't wake up," while a poetic, faraway voice faintly tinged with reproof was calling him from some distant place; "Leo . . . Leo . . . wake up, it's me." Still immersed in the subconscious, he told himself that it was only a dream, and with his eyes stubbornly shut, cocooning himself as deeply as possible under the covers, he was hoping (after that momentary confusion) to plunge back into the thick and delicious jumble of dream. . . . But the calls kept on coming, clearer and clearer, until at last a hand shook his shoulder.

He opened his eyes and saw — Mariagrazia.

At first he thought he wasn't seeing clearly; then he looked

again. Yes, there was no doubt about it; it was really his lover, dressed in gray with her hat on her head and a fur draped around her neck, standing beside the bed. The shadows of night had withdrawn from the room. It must be a beautiful day, since joyous spangles of light shone and danced over the dark, dusty furniture.

"You, *here*?" he said at last. "How did you get in?"

"I came over to bring you an invitation," answered Mariagrazia, "but I found the door open and so I came in."

Leo stared at her in astonishment. "The door open?" he thought. "Oh, right, it must have been Carla. . . ." He yawned and stretched luxuriously.

"And you came to tell me?"

Carla's mother sat down on the bed, in the shadow shot through with threads of light like stripes, filtering through the slats of the blinds. "I wanted to call you," she began, "but since we haven't paid the bills for two months, they disconnected the phone. Listen, last night you promised me we could see each other tomorrow, but then I was thinking about it . . . and I wondered . . . would you be free this afternoon?"

Leo sat up and wrapped his arms around his knees. "This afternoon?" he repeated. Actually, he rather liked this plan, since he calculated that if he could free himself of his entanglement with the mother today, he'd have the rest of the week open for Carla. But he didn't want to promise anything; he didn't want any surprises.

"Listen," he said, "today after lunch I'll come over to your place. I'll be able to tell you something then, all right?"

"All right."

A long silence followed. Diffident and discontented, Mariagrazia looked around, examining the too-well-known furniture, the bed, and her lover's face with great attention; his face, in particular, looked pale, even exhausted. This and the fact that she had found him immersed in sleep at this late hour were enough to confirm certain of her jealous suspicions. "He spent the night with Lisa," she thought. "There's no doubt about it. Lisa was probably here just a little while ago." She felt a bitter

rancor, and launched a look of poisonous reproof at her lover.

"If," she said in a bittersweet tone, "I were in your place, I wouldn't act as if I were only twenty years old."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning," replied Mariagrazia, "that you're getting old and you don't know it. And you don't even know that the kind of lunacy you were probably up to last night is too much for you now. . . . Look in a mirror," she added, raising her voice, "do me a favor and take a look at the circles under your eyes, look at the colors in your face, it's like some kind of ugly mask. Go ahead, look."

"*I'm* getting old? And what lunacy?" demanded Leo, irritated above all by that direct allusion to his advancing age. "Exactly what sort of lunacy are we talking about?"

"Oh, I understand," said his lover, waving airily, "but you know what I say? That in another year or two at the most they'll be rolling you around in a wheelchair . . . you won't even be able to walk anymore."

Leo shrugged his shoulders furiously. "Look, if you came over just to dump this craziness on me, you might as well leave." He looked at the clock on the bedside table. "Twelve o'clock! And I'm sitting here listening to you when I have an appointment at twelve-thirty . . . get out, get out of here now!" He jumped out of bed, thrust his feet into his slippers, dashed to the window, and opened the blinds; the room filled with light.

"Why don't you put on the bathrobe I gave you?" asked Mariagrazia without moving from the bed. "Have you already given it away to some little tart you took in for the night?"

Leo went into the bathroom without answering her. She got up and began to stroll around the room, partly out of curiosity, partly just for something to do. "And what about that other present I gave you, that magnificent glass vase from Murano . . . it's not here. Did you give that away, too?" she shouted. There was still no response. She heard a jet of water pelt down in the bathroom; Leo was taking a shower.

Discouraged but not defeated, she continued her inspection. Every object in that room evoked pleasant memories for her; and

the comparison between her present misery and the happiness of times past made her sigh heavily. But the sight of her own photograph in its frame on top of the bureau restored her confidence somewhat. "Really, he doesn't love anyone but me," she thought. "Whenever he's sick or in some kind of trouble, it's always me that he runs to . . . and this is just some momentary coldness . . . he'll come back to me." On her way over she had bought a bunch of violets from a street vendor and pinned it to her breast; now, partly from gratitude and partly with the vague idea of doing something tender, she took them off and put them in a little vase beside her photograph. Then she went into the bathroom.

Leo was standing in front of the mirror in his robe, shaving his face.

"I'm going to leave now," Mariagrazia told him. "And by the way . . . when you come over today, pretend you didn't see me, pretend you just got the written invitation. All right?"

"All right," he answered, without turning around.

Satisfied, Mariagrazia left. She rushed down the stairs, and at the street corner she climbed into a trolley headed toward the center of the city; already Lisa must have been waiting for at least twenty minutes at the hat shop, where they had an appointment to look at the new models from Paris together. Mariagrazia sat down in a corner next to a window, turned her back as far as possible to the other passengers, and gazed out at the street. The sidewalks were packed with a lively crowd of workers of every sort going home for dinner; the cold February sun shone on their faces, reddened by the icy wind, beneath the worn brims of their faded and shapeless hats and on their bodies wrapped in overcoats turned green by time. Although this dim, pale, wintry sun gave off no heat, it cast its light generously on all those ancient rags almost as if it wished to bless them. One after another the gleaming storefronts with red, blue, or white writing on their windows filed by; their neon signs hanging gray and spent from the eaves looked like worms burnt to ashes. The streetcar advanced slowly, as multicolored, full, and vulgar as a carousel, shuddering and clanging along. Every once in a while, the shining oblong of a car hood

would pull forward beneath Mariagrazia's eyes, stop as if searching for a breach with its great headlights, and then leap forward again; and she would see someone sitting behind the glass of its windows. A chauffeur, for instance, dressed all in leather with his hands on the wheel and behind him, sprawling at ease on the leather cushions, some big-bellied man lazily scanning the crowd with half-closed eyes, or some lady with a delicate, made-up face, enveloped in a thick fur coat. . . . Then she would sigh in spite of herself, knowing that she would never pass through the ragged crowd in a powerful, imposing automobile; her good years were gone and her youth dissipated in the shining car of her dreams. Little by little the objects of her envy, those ephemeral figures gliding by with arrowlike rapidity in their rumbling chariots, distanced themselves even from her imagination and hope, and she went on with her own journey, in resignation and with a certain disgusted dignity, in the unwieldy, colored cart of iron and glass.

She found Lisa sitting in the back of the milliner's shop, which was full of mirrors and new hats. A young woman was admiring herself fatuously in a full-length mirror, walking back and forth with affected, royal gestures; the sound of voices drifted in from the other room and then the click of a door being shut. The floor smelled like wax and the room was bare and gray; in one corner there was a pyramidal pile of large, light, white cardboard boxes, some closed and some open; and in the opposite corner a thick forest of new hats had sprung up, in fresh, sober, delicate colors, all hanging from their wooden hat pegs.

As soon as she saw Mariagrazia, Lisa got up. "I'm so sorry," she said, "oh! very sorry, but I can't stay here with you . . . it's late, I have to go home."

The other woman looked at her suspiciously. "What an egotist she is," she thought. "She's made her choice already and now she wants to keep me from making mine."

"Well, I'll stay here, then," she said with an irresolute expression.

"Do as you like," said Lisa, holding out her hand; but Mariagrazia had changed her mind.

"No, I'll come with you. I can think about hats some other day."

They walked out together onto the crowded street. "I'll keep you company," she added, "until we get to the gardens, that way we'll have time to talk." Lisa didn't answer. They strolled along companionably, stopping frequently in front of the window displays to examine the merchandise and compare prices; the jewelry stores made Mariagrazia especially melancholy. "I had a necklace like that once," she sighed, pointing to a strand of pearls mounted in its case, "but not anymore." Lisa looked over at her but said nothing; her jewelry had also departed for distant destinations. "But mine," she thought, "were stolen by my husband. At least I didn't have to sell them just to make the rent." After a while they reached the end of the street.

Mariagrazia had come with her friend in order to vent her suspicions about Leo; but then the crowd, the shops, and the luminous morning had mitigated her rancor. But when they saw Leo himself in the piazza, speaking to a man in a black coat, and he greeted her without looking at her or interrupting his conversation, merely lifting his hat infinitesimally from his head, the thought of his infidelity returned to torment her more fiercely than ever.

She looked at Lisa. "No later than last night," she thought, "she was with him." This supposition seemed irrefutable to her, since she based it on a conviction that, even to eyes less impassioned than her own, it was patently obvious that there was "something" between them. Examining Lisa, she was sure the woman was emanating a certain new seduction, a corporeal joy difficult to define, yet incontestable, and this change was an indication — Mariagrazia noted it with morbid disgust — an indication of satisfied love. No, there could be no doubt about it, you could read it in her face, with its fat, delicate features so particular to certain kinds of blondes: Lisa loved and was loved, but by whom? "By Leo," thought the mother, and her jealousy swelled, fed by the indecent images of her imagination. "No later than last night," she thought, discovering in her friend's moist eyes and sensitively

flaring nostrils the confirmations of her loathing. "How could any man make love to a woman like that?" she asked herself in real, hysterical revulsion. "I couldn't even touch her, as full of heat, as swollen with lust as she is . . . she's not a woman, she's a beast." And her fingers curled in disgust at the thought that Leo might have caressed, touched, played with that body, that face, all that hot, throbbing *stuff*.

Now a long, broad, straight avenue bordered by trees stretched out before them, unwinding into the gray distance between two rows of villas half-hidden behind their gardens. The gigantic plane trees were bare and the air was cold and still; not many people were out walking in this solitary place. The great automobiles Mariagrazia dreamed of passed by them almost in silence, rolling over the smooth asphalt with a swish of silk and a low hum.

She was telling Lisa about her preparations for the dance she and Carla had been invited to that night. "That Spanish dress sets off my complexion so beautifully," she was saying. "And I'm going to wear a great big comb, you know, one of those Andalusian combs. . . . We've been invited to sit at the Berardis' table. And you . . . are you coming?"

"Me?" asked Lisa, lowering her eyes, "Me? To the dance? I don't have anyone to go with." She stopped, waiting for her friend's answer with a certain anxiety. She felt that Mariagrazia should invite her to go; after all, she knew the Berardis, and she could dress up in some kind of costume . . . and she could drink and have fun. . . . Then, afterward, she would ask Mariagrazia to leave her Michele (she liked to treat him like a little boy), who would accompany her home. They would drive home in a closed car with the light turned off, late at night; she would joke around with him, teasing and exciting him. . . . It was a long way to her house and the streets would be dark, so they would have time to talk and fall silent — in other words, to come to an understanding — and at the door she would invite him to come up for a small glass of liqueur or a cup of tea before going back out into the cold night.

This plan pleased her because of the inevitability of the events

it must surely lead to: it was impossible that Michele would refuse to come up to her place, impossible. . . .

But his mother was speaking already; she had thought about her reply, and like all those persons who believe themselves to be in possession of dangerous reserves of malice, she injected so little into her words that it went unobserved. "You have plenty of friends," she said pointedly. "Have one of them go with you."

"*You're* my friends," replied Lisa, who wanted to be invited at any cost. "I don't have any friends but you."

"Thanks, but that's overly kind of you."

"Who invited you? The Berardis? But I know them," continued Lisa, "of course, I know them . . . we once went on vacation together."

"Really?"

"And who's going with you two?" asked Lisa innocently.

"Le-o," replied her friend, emphasizing each syllable, "will be at another table. We're going with the Berardis."

"What do I care about Leo!" thought Lisa. "Will it be dazzling, *brillante*?" she asked dubiously.

"*Brillantissimo.*"

They were silent for a moment.

"I'd like to go . . . ," Lisa began again, trying to sound careless and not looking at her friend, "even if only to see the Berardis again. It's been so long since we've seen each other — maybe years."

"Ah! The Berardis! Really?" Mariagrazia tapped the tip of her umbrella nervously against the stones of the sidewalk. "It's the Berardis you want to see?"

"Yes," said Lisa without looking at her; she was rummaging around in her mind, trying to remember something. "Pippo, Mary, Fanny . . . how are they doing?"

"They're doing fine, don't worry, their health's in no danger."

Another silence. "And now," wondered Lisa, looking at her friend's flushed face, "what's got into her?" She had finally become aware of the other woman's nervousness, which didn't bode well for her own desires. "What egotism," she thought bitterly.

"She understood from the very first word that I wanted to go, and she's not going to invite me out of pure spite." She felt a little discouraged, but made one last stab at it.

"I have to confess to you, Mariagrazia," she murmured in a persuasive voice, "that I'd like very much to go to the dance. I don't want to put you out, but maybe you could take me with you to sit at the Berardis' table?" She waited, and then saw her friend laugh.

"Oh! That's a good one," said Mariagrazia between bursts of bitter laughter. "And *I* should take you? Thanks a lot, dear, for the delicate thought, really, I thank you, but I don't perform that sort of service."

"What sort of service?" began Lisa irritably, finally starting to comprehend the significance of all the other woman's ironies, but she was interrupted.

"All right, do you really want me to tell you? I understand everything! You don't want to go to the dance for me or for the Berardis, you want to go for somebody else, somebody else you're interested in!"

"What would that matter to you?"

"Right!" said Mariagrazia, shaking her head bitterly. "Right . . . what would it matter to me? Nothing, nothing, nothing at all, actually you're right, why should I care? Why should I care if they rob me or murder me? Nothing, nothing, I shouldn't care at all!" She savored the poison of her thoughts for a moment in silence, and then started up again. "And this is happening because I'm too good, too good . . . if I had ground you under my heel the first time," and she swiveled her feet as if she were squashing something, "this wouldn't be happening now."

"Ground me under your heel? Me? *Me?* Are you crazy, Mariagrazia? Are you out of your mind?"

The two women walked on, quarreling, down the otherwise empty sidewalk, the mother wearing a gray dress and Lisa a brown one. They both had fox furs around their necks, Lisa's tawny and Mariagrazia's silver; they walked and quarreled. The gleaming automobiles rolled past them, an elegant young couple strolled by

once in a while; it was all gray and gold. The people, whether they were near or far away, were gray, as were the deep gardens beyond their iron fences, and the deserted avenue, and the plane trees. But the cold new sun still congealed in the winter frost was gold, and it streamed with light and water as if its rays were icicles melting. As chilled and joyful as a convalescent wrapped in cotton wool was that golden sun wrapped in the pale blue cotton wool of February.

The mother continued her monologue.

"Too good?" repeated Lisa, with a high, scornful laugh. "*You*, too *good?*"

There was an instant of silence.

"However," went on Mariagrazia, moving away a little and looking into the air in front of her as if she were addressing some third party, "I really don't understand how men bring themselves to make love to certain women . . . I really don't get it."

"Neither do I." Lisa paled and her lips trembled; why was her friend acting so harshly, so pitilessly? Lisa hadn't done anything to her. She felt sad that a mother would pay attention to her own son only for the purpose of hurting an ancient rival; what could it matter, really, to Mariagrazia that she wanted to go to the ball to meet Michele? And since it was the first time in her entire life that Lisa had been wrongly accused, her rancor was grand and exuberant. In reaction to this injustice, she felt herself drawn back to the days of her innocence; she sprouted the wings and soul of an angel, the halo of a martyr. She loved Michele and Michele loved her. How could anyone find anything to disapprove of, anything to feel scandalized about, in such a pure story?

"And last night," Mariagrazia continued, "last night how did things go? Wonderfully, didn't they? He didn't want to stay with *us*, he had to run *off*, well, that's all right, he had *you* waiting for him." She was silent for a second. "You know what I have to say to you?" she burst out, turning around to stare at Lisa again. "That you should be *ashamed* of yourself!" She twisted her painted mouth in disgust, looking her friend up and down. "You're not even young anymore."

"We're almost the same age . . . in fact, you're older than I am," answered Lisa mildly, without raising her head.

"No, ma'am!" declared Mariagrazia with the voice of authority. "It's a whole different thing. I'm a widow, but you're still married . . . your husband is alive. . . . Shame on you! That's what I say."

At that moment they happened to be walking under a villa with all its windows closed; in its backyard, completely surrounded by huge, bare trees, people must have been playing squash; they could hear the strokes echo in the silence of the midday sky with a dry snap, as if something were cracking up there behind the blue; and if the wind dispersing the white smoke from the chimneys blew from the direction of the street, they could even hear the loud, gay voices of the players.

Lisa stopped for an instant to listen, lost in thought, to that echo, then looked at Mariagrazia. She felt surprised and confused, and wondered . . . was it possible that that angry, jealous face was reflecting . . . *maternal* love? And what *sort* of maternal love could it be that made a woman that angry, especially a woman who had never shown herself to be excessively tender with her children? Or was it no more nor less than physical, *carnal* jealousy, the jealousy of a lover?

Suddenly she understood. Her first reaction was relief; then she looked at Mariagrazia and her doubts returned.

"Mariagrazia," she asked, "tell me . . . are you talking about . . . about Leo? You are, aren't you?"

She saw her friend nod in assent, with an embarrassed and pained expression that seemed to say: "Why are you even asking me? You know I have no one but him."

They stared at each other. An immense relief, a kind of triumphant pity shone from Lisa's eyes. She said, "My poor Mariagrazia," and wanted to explain, to prove herself innocent, to smooth out that suspicious furrow on her friend's anxious forehead. "My poor Mariagrazia," she said again. She was suddenly assailed by memories from the scene she had witnessed the day before: the candle, and Leo and Carla in each other's arms. "It's

her daughter," she thought, "her own daughter that she should be jealous of." And she felt a little compassion for her friend, so lost in her illusions; but at the same time she felt such joy, such happiness that she was not to blame, not guilty of the other woman's accusations, that she didn't know how to answer her, with contempt or with pity.

"You can be sure," she said at last, "very sure, that I wasn't with Leo last night . . . or ever. Look, I can swear it to you on all that I hold most sacred."

Mariagrazia continued to scrutinize her with searching, suspicious eyes and said nothing.

"Believe me," added Lisa, beginning to feel uneasy under this silent inquisition, "this has been a misunderstanding."

Michele's mother looked away and lowered her head. "It would be better to go our separate ways," she said, in an attempt to appear cold, contained, and dignified in the extreme. "It's getting late."

They could hear the ball striking against the rackets and, at intervals, the voices of the players. Mariagrazia walked on a few steps.

"Believe me," repeated Lisa uncertainly, "a misunderstanding." She looked around as if seeking support. But at that moment the avenue was deserted, and the sun increased its solitude by illuminating the sidewalk, empty as far as the eye could see. So Lisa looked around and finally stood still, while Mariagrazia walked slowly away, step by step, gazing pensively and distractedly at the ground.

"Believe me!" Lisa was tempted to yell after her. "It's with Carla that Leo's betraying you, with your own daughter, my poor Mariagrazia, not with me. . . ."

But she could read in her friend's curved back the stubborn determination not to turn around and face the truth. Lisa watched her grow smaller and smaller, her colors fading under the sun, her figure merging with the moving shadows of the high garden gates. Finally she was no more than a small black spot, far, far away and growing ever farther, at the end of the avenue.

12

WHY HAD LISA first all but admitted that she was to blame and then protested that she was innocent? Many might find themselves bewildered when confronted with this question, but not Mariagrazia. To her it was all clear, crystal clear, completely explicable; she was deeply convinced that Lisa was a hypocrite and a liar. She wasn't sure why — but something about Lisa's expression, words, attitudes, actions. . . . It was an ancient conviction, probably stemming from some long-forgotten event, but it was so fundamental to her moral portrait of Lisa that to abandon it would be like erasing her friend's figure completely from her mind.

So Lisa was a liar and a hypocrite; that cleared up everything. But why had she said, almost compassionately, "My poor Mariagrazia"? Evidently to make fun of her, to tease her, or even to commiserate with her on account of her blindness and naïveté and the enormity of her lover's betrayal. And why had she shown such an open desire to go to the dance with Mariagrazia and the Berardis? Transparent: it was a Machiavellian maneuver to make Mariagrazia think that Lisa *wasn't expecting Leo that night.* In

other words Lisa, with her usual falsity, had come up with a thousand strategems by which to deceive her friend — but had she succeeded? Oh, no! No, she certainly had not; it took a lot more than that to pull the wool over *Mariagrazia's* eyes, a *lot* more than that. "Don't delude yourself, my dear," she felt like saying, enraged. "I may be an idiot, but not *that* big an idiot. The days are past when I thought everyone was good and sweet and loving and kind. . . . Now I keep my eyes open, I'm not so easy to fool . . . oh! no, my dear . . . once is enough. . . . So don't delude yourself, darling, I understand everything . . . and you're not going to get me to swallow that one. I'm sharp, very sharp, in fact *extremely* sharp."

While she was thinking, she was also unconsciously shaking her head with great satisfaction and smiling with an expression of bitter yet careless superiority on her face. What irritated her most was the thought that her friend could believe her to be so infected with gullibility and credulousness. She squinted her eyes and clenched her teeth in rage as she walked; she had never felt so pitiless. If Lisa were dying of thirst, she would have refused her the last glass of water; if she were dying of hunger, she would have refused her the last bite of food. If she became suddenly poor she could drop to her knees and kiss Mariagrazia's hands, and Mariagrazia still wouldn't give her a cent, not a thing — nothing! And if she were at death's door and called her friend to her bedside, Mariagrazia would let her die alone like a dog, yes, die alone in her filthy bed with her face to the wall in an empty room! And on top of all that, Mariagrazia felt herself perfectly capable of poking her, jabbing her, torturing her, dragging her by the hair, and grinding her high heels into her belly, her breasts, her face. . . . She felt capable of anything; never in her life had she felt so fully, voluptuously evil.

But . . . but wasn't forgiveness the best revenge of all? Yes! But which kind of forgiveness? Affectionate, friendly, cheerful forgiveness? Or cold, contemptuous forgiveness, thrown into someone's face like charity? The second.

Lisa . . . Lisa had ruined herself; she had debts and had sunk into poverty, become a ragged beggar on the streets; everyone had

abandoned her. . . . Or . . . after suffering a serious illness she had wasted away, become gray and ugly and, who knows, these things do happen, maybe even feebleminded, maybe blind . . . hollow face, white eyes . . . bumping her forehead into the furniture and passersby . . . the finger of God! The punishment of heaven! These things do happen. . . . Then she would forgive her . . . slowly . . . wait! just a minute! she would forgive her, yes, but only halfway . . . with contempt, coldness, and ruthless memory, humiliating her and making sure to keep her at a distance so she would understand that she was no longer worthy even of Mariagrazia's *hatred.* And how would she inflict this forgiveness? Ah . . . ah. . . .

It was evening and Mariagrazia was giving a party . . . a big band was playing dance tunes . . . dancing couples were moving back and forth in front of the golden doors of her salons. And under the lit chandeliers and in front of the buffet, in the most intimate corners, in the atriums, even out on the terraces where they could lean against the marble railings and watch the moon rise up behind the dark tips of the cypress trees — everywhere in her house, in fact — the very cream of high society was gathered. It was the culminating moment, when conversations and music merged into a single continous sound, when passions flared and flowers wilted, and gallant declarations were murmured into ladies' ears. . . . Then a maid would come and whisper to her, "Signora Lisa is here."

She would get up right away . . . no, she would make her wait a little while and then go out, excusing herself to her guests. She would go into the vestibule full of coats and hats piled up on one another . . . not a chair free . . . and among all those rich silks and velvets and furs, she would find Lisa standing, dressed in rags and aged at least ten years . . . Lisa, stretching out her arms as soon as she saw her. . . . Slowly, slowly, my dear! Once she had reestablished the proper distance, she would listen magnanimously to the other woman's muddled excuses and protestations of friendship, and then very coldly, very haughtily, she would say to her, "Yes, all right, I forgive you . . . but you need to be patient, you

need to wait here or in the anteroom. . . . You know, I'm receiving all kinds of people to whom I couldn't possibly introduce you . . . nobility, you know? aristocrats. People who don't want to know just anybody, people whose circles are very closed. Understand? You go up and wait for me. . . ." And she'd let her wait the whole night long until finally, in the wee hours, she would present herself to the wretched woman all huddled up in her sorrow and shame in the shadows . . . she would walk forward smiling her most beautiful smile and wearing her richest, most beautiful dress and she would say, "I'm so sorry, Lisa, but I really can't talk to you tonight . . . why don't you come over tomorrow . . . maybe tomorrow I'll have the time." And she would laugh and then she would leave. And who was that waiting for her at the door, standing in front of a colossal automobile, eight cylinders, nickel-plated hood, two chauffeurs, all upholstered in satin? Leo! Leo . . . and they would go off together, laughing at Lisa's return . . . they would go off gaily together into the night.

These movies galloping across the screen of her soul consoled Mariagrazia. Every once in a while, however, she would raise her eyes, and then the sun and the landscape would break in to disrupt her visions, and she would realize that she was still the same old Mariagrazia, that she was as far away from those dreams as she was from the Indies, and that she was walking down the empty streets of the suburb. Finally she found herself in front of her own house, pushed on the gate, and went in.

She hurried across the path in the park. She felt tired and wasn't sure why, whether it was from fighting with Lisa or just from the sense of futility that wore her down every time she abandoned herself to her fantasies. She found Michele in the anteroom, sitting in an armchair and smoking a cigarette.

"I'm dead. . . ," she said, languidly taking off her hat. "Where's Carla?"

"Out," replied Michele. His mother left without another word.

Michele was in a foul mood. The events of the night before had left him deeply dissatisfied, and he understood that he must, for once and for all, vanquish his indifference and take some sort

of action. Without a doubt, the action would have to suggest itself to him out of some logic extraneous to his own truth: filial love, hatred toward his mother's lover, familial affection — all these were feelings unknown to him. But what did that matter? When you aren't sincere you need to pretend, and by pretending you end up believing yourself; that's the basic principle of every faith.

A stunt, then?

Yes, nothing but a stunt would do the trick. "Lisa, for example," thought Michele. "I don't love her, I don't even desire her, and yet yesterday evening I kissed her hand and today I'm going to her house. At first I'll be cold, icy cold, but then I'll get excited, I'll feel aroused. . . . It's ridiculous, but I think at this rate I'll end up as her lover."

Neither faith nor sincerity nor the sense of tragedy existed for him anymore; everything seemed pitiful, false, and absurd through the lens of his boredom. But he comprehended the difficulties and dangers of his situation and knew that he must impassion himself, take action, suffer, vanquish his weakness, falseness, compassion, and acute awareness of absurdity — that he must be tragic and sincere.

"How wonderful the world must have been," he thought in ironic regret, "when a betrayed husband could shout at his wife, 'Evil woman, you'll pay for your sins with your life!' and better yet, that he could *think* such words, and then swoop down and murder wife, lover, relatives — everyone — without punishment and without remorse. A time when thought was followed by action: 'I hate you' and *zac!* a dagger thrust, and the enemy or friend is lying on the ground in a pool of blood. A time when people didn't think so much, and the first impulse was always the best one; when life wasn't ridiculous, as it was now, but tragic. A time when you *really* died and killed and hated and loved, in earnest, and wept true tears for true misfortunes, and all men were made of flesh and blood and bones and attached to reality like trees to the earth." Little by little his irony vanished and left him with only regret. He wished so much that he could have lived in that tragic and sincere era and experienced those great, overwhelming

hatreds, risen up to those boundless, powerful feelings. . . . But he was trapped in his own age and his own life, unable to get off the ground.

He thought and smoked. The box of ten cigarettes on the table now held only one; it had been almost two hours that he had been sitting in the anteroom filled with the white light of morning. He had gotten up late and dressed meticulously: ties, suits, shirts, how much attention he paid to them all in his efforts to console himself, in the midst of his misery, by emulating the clear aesthetics of British fashion! He envied and admired those English gentlemen standing casually beside their torpedo-shaped cars, dressed in their full-cut overcoats, their clean-shaven faces wrapped in their warm woolen scarves. He liked the banal and elegant backgrounds in those pictures: for instance, cottages nestling beneath the foliage of trees as round and soft as clouds. He was seduced by the models' gestures, the knots of their ties, the sharp creases of their clothes, their baubles and wools.

Now he was sitting in the armchair in a noble and elegant position, his legs crossed, his pants impeccably hitched up over wool socks, his hair shining and meticulously combed, his head inclined slightly to one side toward the cigarette he was holding languidly between two fingers. On his smooth, soft, oval face ironic reflections alternated with sudden darker expressions, like light and shadow playing across the face of a statue; he smoked and thought.

Carla came back from her tennis match, climbing the stairs slowly. She was wearing a multicolored sweater over a pleated white skirt and was carrying her jacket, racket, and tennis-ball carrier. "Where's Mamma?" she called, reaching the top of the stairs and smiling. She came over to stand in front of Michele. "I ran into Pippo Berardi," she went on, "and he said we're both invited to dinner, Mamma and me, and then they're going to take us to the dance. If you want you can meet up with us there."

Michele smoked and said nothing.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked, as he observed her. "Why are you looking at me like that?" Her nervous voice rang

out in the empty anteroom, a strange challenge full of sorrow and hope. Her new life was beginning and she wanted everyone to know it; but within this vigorous yet ephemeral joy crouched an intolerable distress that was exhausting her, making her want to close her eyes, cross her arms over her breast, and sink down into the obscurity of a deep, black sleep.

Her mother walked in. "You know, Mamma," said Carla languidly and less happily, "the Berardis have invited us to supper . . . and . . . then they'll take us to the dance."

"All right," said her mother without enthusiasm. She was wearing no makeup, so the skin of her face looked shiny; her nose was chilled and red; she launched an icy look at them from between her puffy lids. "In that case," she added, "we should put on our costumes soon." She sat down. "And you," she said, staring at Michele, "I need to talk to you."

Carla left.

"With me?" echoed Michele, pretending to be enormously surprised. "With me? About what?"

His mother shook her head. "You know better than I do. . . . Last night you threw the ashtray at Leo. Luckily you hit *me* . . . I've still got the mark. . . ." She raised a hand to slip her dress down off her shoulder, but her son stopped her.

"No," he said in disgust, "no, thank you. Let's not engage in useless exhibitionism. I'm not Leo, you know."

There was a silence. His mother's face twisted and her eyes darkened. She sat very still with her hand on her breast in a gesture filled with dignity, like a madonna pointing to her own pierced heart. It was a gesture that had started out ridiculous but had become almost profound, as if his mother were trying to show him, not the mark left by the ashtray, but some other, deeper wound. What? Michele could not have defined it, and already the pose was dissolving and the woman speaking again. "I'm not trying to be hard on you," she said, in an altered voice. "But what's wrong with you, Michele, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong." The boy's distress deepened. "She should *know* what's wrong," he thought, moved and exasperated; his

mother's tearful voice made him shiver. "If she goes on like this," he thought, "she'll become pathetic and ridiculous — ridiculous! These sentimentalities of hers . . . I have to cut her off . . . at any cost. I don't *want* to watch her cry, or scream, or plead! At any cost. . . ."

"Michele," the woman went on, "do your mother a favor."

"As many as you like," he declared, assuming an amiable expression.

"Then," she said, regaining a bit of serenity, completely oblivious to his irony, "prove it to me. For example . . . show a little friendship to Leo, or at least pretend to feel some. Look, that's all I'm asking."

They were silent for a moment, looking at each other. "And Leo?" asked Michele, whose expression had instantly hardened. "Does he feel any friendship toward me?"

"Him?" exclaimed his mother, with a touching, youthful smile full of ingenuous illusion. "He loves you like a father."

"Ah! Really?" asked the boy in utter amazement; so much good faith, so much incomprehension discouraged him. "There's nothing to be done about it," he thought. "As long as we stay here together, my life doesn't belong to me but to her." And to her also belonged this deformed world, so false it set his teeth on edge, bitterly grotesque; and for him, for his clear-sightedness, there was no place in it.

"Leo," said his mother, with her particular clear and triumphant laugh, "is the best man on earth!"

Ah, great, wonderful! There was nothing left to say; the earth itself stopped turning in its outrage, and resigned, Michele said nothing.

"He often talks to me about you," she went on, "about his worries and hopes for you. . . ."

"Thank him for me," interrupted the boy.

"Don't you believe me?" asked his mother. "Look, no later than the day before yesterday he was telling me about his plans for you two, you and Carla. If you could have heard him — you'd have seen the extent of that man's goodness. 'I know very well,' he

said to me, 'that Michele doesn't like me very much, but that doesn't matter . . . I love him anyway. Before long, as soon as Carla gets married, he'll need to find a job. And at that point, listen, he can count on recommendations, help, and encouragement from me.'"

"He said that?" asked Michele, interested; his diffidence yielded to these seductions the way an easy woman yields with a smile of pleasure if someone pinches her breasts or hips. "And if it were true?" he thought. "If Leo really did want to help me to make something of myself, to become . . . rich?" Buoyed by this hope, his excited imagination conjured up visions of all he envied and desired: luxuriously wealthy women with precious smiles, journeys, deluxe hotels, an intense life divided between business and unbridled amusements. It was like going to the movies, where sophisticated cities with their arrays of riches, distant landscapes, adventures, and the most beautiful women and most fortunate men in the world paraded before the spellbound eyes of the crowd to the triumphant and nostalgic music of the orchestra. And on this movie screen of his ambitions things went faster and faster, following the accelerated rhythm of his heart; the images of his fantasies chased each other, caught up with each other, mingled and rushed ahead of each other. It was the terrible race of hope, which makes the breath catch and the soul tremble, which first deludes and then dissolves, leaving behind it the mediocrity of the real — exactly like the end of a movie, when the lights come on and people blink at each other with bitter, disenchanted faces.

"If it were true," he repeated to himself, "if it were true?"

"He said that," continued his mother, "and a lot of other things, too." She was silent for an instant and then added, "He's good," gazing before her as if she could see Leo and his goodness, one next to the other, right there in the middle of the room. "He's truly good. Of course, even he has his faults, but let those who don't cast the first stone. . . . You musn't judge him by appearances, you know. He's a man of few words, he's brusque, he doesn't say everything he's thinking about, he hides his own feelings, but you have to know him intimately . . ."

"Which you do," thought Michele, both amused and irritated.

". . . to understand how expansive, gay, and affectionate he can be. . . . I still remember," continued his mother, with a tender smile, "how he used to hold you on his knees, you and Carla. You were both little and he used to fill your hands and mouths with chocolates. . . . Or I would surprise him playing with the two of you, Michele . . . he used to play with you as if he were a little boy himself."

Michele smiled in pity. "So tell me," he interrupted, to escape the full volley of those pathetic and familiar recollections, "did he really say he would help me out?"

"Of course," said Mariagrazia uncertainly, "of course he'll help you out . . . as soon as you get your degree. He has so many acquaintances, so many friends in high positions," and she raised a hand as if to indicate the summits where her lover's friends and acquaintances sat triumphant and erect, "of course he'll help you out."

"Ah! He will?" A pleased smile tugged at Michele's lips: that best of all men, excellent Leo! His mother was right after all. At bottom, though he was a practical man and rather abrupt, he had a heart of gold. One of these days Michele would go to him and say, "Listen, Leo . . . write me a letter for so-and-so, you know, that big shot. . . ." Or: "Do me a favor, Leo . . . could you lend me a hundred thousand lire?" And Leo would say, "Right away, Michele . . . make yourself comfortable . . . here's the letter . . . here's the money . . . do you want it in cash or by check? And anytime you need anything," he would add fondly, walking the boy to the door and placing an encouraging hand on his shoulder, "you know you can come back, since I promised your mother I'd help you out in life . . . in whatever way I can, any time." Oh, Leo! Leo, that strong man, that safe, good man! Michele's heart swelled with friendship and affection, and a thousand memories and anecdotes came back to him now in which Leo appeared as modest, practical, trustworthy, and generous, bathed in good humor, good sense, *goodness* itself; a figure now gay, now serious, but never ridiculous — a gruff, mischievous, paternal, exemplary figure.

"Yes," his mother went on, gradually sensing her victory, "yes, he'll help you, but only if you start acting nicer to him . . . otherwise he could end up taking it the wrong way. Look at Carla, for instance! Never a word too many, never an inappropriate gesture . . . and he . . . why, he's very fond of her."

"Ah, he's fond of her?" inquired Michele, smiling with trepidation.

"Certainly he is! In fact, he's *so* fond of her that he thinks of her just like a daughter. For instance, he understands that she needs to find a husband . . . that it's now or never . . . and he's working toward it. If you only knew how much he's thinking about it! Just last night at the dance he was talking to me about it, saying that Pippo Berardi would be a good match. . . ."

"He's so ugly!" exclaimed Michele.

"Ugly but nice. So as you can see," concluded his mother, "we need to keep him close, our Leo."

"Our Leo," repeated the boy to himself with a shiver of joy.

"So don't put him off, don't drive him away from us by being rude, or worse yet, throwing ashtrays at him." Completely reassured, she took one of Michele's hands in her own. "Now, do you promise me," she asked, "do you promise you'll be nicer to Leo?" Her voice trembled with sudden, sincere emotion, and her heart opened like a coffer filled with love, which she would have liked, such was her tenderness, to spill out over everyone: Leo, Carla, Michele, Pippo Berardi. . . . "Do you promise me, Michelino?" she repeated; and for her that diminutive represented her child in his infancy, the little boy with the big clear eyes, and the years long past, and her own lost youth. *Michelino* was her son, not Michele.

"Yes, of course," replied the boy, made uncomfortable by those eyes shining with emotion, "yes, I promise you." But he understood too late that he had lost himself, for all his "clear-sightedness," lost himself in his mother's passion as if in a dark wood.

Carla came in. "What are you doing?" she asked. "I thought you were both eating dinner."

"Nothing," answered Michele, already regretting his promise, "we were just talking. . . ."

"Right," explained their mother eagerly, "I was telling him that he should be nicer to Leo. Don't you think I'm right, Carla? Leo does us so many favors, he's such an old friend of the family, you might say he's watched you grow up . . . he shouldn't be treated like just anybody."

Carla looked at her mother without moving, standing very straight in the middle of the room. For the very first time, seeing her so blind and inoffensive, she realized that she had betrayed her. "What would you say," she thought, "if you found out the truth?"

"I think," she finally answered in a low voice, closing her eyes, "that people should always be nice to each other."

"There!" cried her mother happily. "Even Carla agrees with me! Come here, Carla," she added, suddenly tender, "come here and let me look at you." She drew her close and made her sit down on the arm of the chair, passing a hand over her daughter's cheeks. "Darling," she said, "it seems to me that you look a little pale. Did you sleep well?"

"Very well."

"I didn't," said Mariagrazia ingenuously. "I had a terrible dream. I dreamt that a very fat man was sitting in a corner. And I'm walking up and down, thinking about different things, and finally I go up to him and ask him what time it is, and he doesn't answer. I think maybe he's deaf and I'm about to walk away, when I notice that his eyes are sunk so deep in his flesh that you almost can't see them. . . . His eyelids are all puffy so that his forehead droops down to touch his cheekbones, and you can only just glimpse something clear moving and spying out from between two folds of fat. He's a horror! But I feel pity for him and so I ask him what's the matter with him, and he tells me that he's getting so fat that pretty soon he won't be able to see at all anymore. 'You should eat less,' I tell him, or anyway I say something like that, and just like at first he doesn't answer me . . . so I think that I have to find some way to open up his eyes, 'so he can see,' I say to my-

self, I don't know why, and I'm already reaching out a hand to move aside all that lard that's obstructing his vision, when it starts snowing. . . . The snow's coming down so thick and hard that soon I can't see anything either. I have snow in my eyes and in my ears and in my hair, and I keep tripping and falling down and getting back up, and I'm so cold my teeth are chattering. And finally I wake up and realize that the wind has blown open the window. Isn't that curious? They say that dreams can be explanations. . . . I'd surely like to know what that one meant."

"A winter dream," observed Michele. "So, shall we go eat?"

They stood up. "Really," insisted the mother, "really, Carla, you're very pale. Do you think you overtired yourself playing tennis?"

"No, Mamma."

They descended in silence.

All three sat down in the cold dining room around the overlarge table. They ate without looking at each other, with the chilled, deferential gestures of priests celebrating a rite. None of them spoke a word; and this silence, broken only by the light clinking of spoons against bowls, which, in the bright white daylight reflected from the walls, brought to mind the blood-chilling sound of surgical instruments clinking into basins during an operation — this cold silence devoid of intimacy bothered Mariagrazia, who was both sociable and garrulous.

"What a silence!" she exclaimed at a certain point, smiling. "An angel must have passed over. Tell me the truth, we miss Leo, don't we?"

"Yes," murmured Michele meditatively, "we miss Leo."

Carla lifted her head. "If you miss him now," she wanted to ask, "what about later? What are you going to do when you don't see him anymore?" She felt light and excited, like someone who is about to leave and is sitting for the last time at the family table, eating in a rush and thinking about the imminent journey. Her mother, on the other hand, seemed immovable, nailed forever to her place, petrified in that position and in that expression of regret. "We miss Leo," she would be saying ten, even twenty years

from now, and she would sit there at the head of the table every day, lamenting the loss of her lover.

"It's a fact," said her mother, as if someone had expressed doubt about what she was saying, "that when Leo comes over we all seem to be gayer . . . yesterday, for example. . . . What didn't he say? What didn't he do? He was inexhaustible."

"If you really miss him so much," said Michele with a scornful smile, "if you really can't do without him, why don't you invite him every day . . . in fact, you could go ahead and rent a room to him."

"What nonsense," replied his mother irritably, sensing his irony. "I never meant to say that I couldn't live without him . . ."

"But that's the truth," Michele interrupted, but only in his mind.

". . . only that I enjoy his company because he's gay, amiable, amusing . . . that's all." She resumed eating. "Let's talk about something else," she said at last. "Carla, who was it that invited us, Pippo or the others?"

"Pippo."

"Ah! He was at the tennis match. . . . Did he spend much time with you?"

"Half an hour."

"Just a half an hour?" echoed her mother in disappointment. "Well . . . what did you two talk about?"

"Nothing special," answered Carla, putting down her fork. "We were watching the game."

There was a silence. The maid took their plates away and brought them fresh ones.

"And . . . how did he seem to you?"

"Hmm . . . so so," replied Carla vaguely.

"Well, how does he seem to *you?*" she asked Michele.

"Ugly but nice," he replied, using exactly the same words she had used a few minutes before.

Mariagrazia looked around in dissatisfaction, as if she wished to hear yet another person's opinion. "He's an intelligent, cultured young man, and he's traveled a lot and knows a lot of people

. . . and I think," she insinuated without subtlety, "that he has a crush on you, Carla."

"Oh! Really?"

"They've got to be rich," continued her mother, tracking the logic of her ideas, "very rich. . . ."

"And consequently," Michele concluded ironically to himself, "it would be a good marriage." But he said nothing, only watching all these blunders serenely and curiously, as if they touched him not at all, as if he were a distant and unacquainted spectator.

"They have five cars," added Mariagrazia, obviously exaggerating.

"Ten," pronounced Michele placidly, without lifting his head, "ten cars."

"No," Carla corrected them calmly, "they have only three: Pippo has one, his father has one, and the girls have that little one."

The maid entered with the second course, salvaging the mother's already precarious position.

"Well, Signora Berardi told me," she said, serving herself, "that Mary and Fanny spend eighty thousand lire a year just for dresses."

This was also a slight exaggeration, obviously, but Michele refrained from pointing it out. After all, what good did it do? Certain things can't be cured.

"They do have some pretty dresses," admitted Carla, without envy, but with an underlying, melancholy confirmation of the poverty of her own wardrobe. A white malaise was creeping up on her: mist or muslin? That phantasmagorical whiteness, that cloudy white languor flowing into the room from the veiled windows was squeezing her trembling heart in an enormous, swollen hand of cotton wool; and as that soft padding crushed it, her heart seemed to creak. Fog filled her eyes, and everything around her turned white, a dense and flashing white in which the solitary voices of Michele and her mother became disjointed, extending themselves in elongated vowels, like a record being dragged and slowed under the needle. A spontaneous vision of last night's events returned to torment her: Leo's hand reached out of the fog

swallowing his face and the rest of his body and began to caress her large, sensitive breasts and her flat belly, so that although she was sitting still, she felt as if she were shuddering with pleasure. Then the fog dissolved and her mother, Michele, and the maid, who was offering her the platter, reappeared in a reality made harsher and more synthetic after her secret abandon.

She refused with a mild gesture.

"Why aren't you eating, Carla?" asked her mother.

"I don't know. . . ." She wasn't hungry, sitting there in the midst of all the famished *things* in her life: in truth, this room in which she should have been nourished had nourished itself on *her*; and day by day all those inanimate objects had sucked her vitality dry, with a tenacity stronger than her vain attempts to free herself from them. The best of her blood was flowing in the dark wood of the big-bellied sideboards; the sweet milk of her flesh had dissolved in the eternal whiteness of that air; and in the old mirror across from her place at the table, the image of her adolescence looked back at her from its prison.

"'I don't know' isn't an explanation," insisted her mother. She was eating greedily, looking at the big bites on her fork before shoving them into her mouth. "Their father," she went on, continuing her interminable biography, "earns a lot of money."

"An industrialist," recited Michele, pouring himself some wine, "raw, woven, and printed cottons."

"Ah! An industrialist! An intelligent and energetic man! And he worked his way up from nothing, he's a self-made man." Mariagrazia drank her wine, dried her lips, and finally fixed Michele with a curious, colorless expression of satisfaction. "He's a *commendatore*," she said.

"Oh! Really?" asked Michele in mock amazement. "Berardi is a *commendatore?* Why is that?"

"How should I know?" retorted his mother, lowering her head to eat. Then she raised it, looking at him with those uncomprehending eyes of hers. "Yes," she said, with a distant, dreamy hauteur, "a *commendatore*. . . . Carla," she added abruptly, "I was watching you the other day when you were

dancing with Pippo. You seemed cold, rigid . . . you were dancing like an automaton. And in fact he didn't invite you to dance with him again after that."

"It wasn't me that was cold," answered Carla, somewhat spiritedly, "it was him, he was too *hot* . . . he was making some really indecent suggestions to me . . . so I told him to shut up and we danced in silence."

Her mother shook her head incredulously. "Go on," she said with a knowing smile, "go on . . . what could he have said that was so indecent? The usual nonsense that young men say to young women. . . . The truth is, Carla," she added, "I think you've taken a dislike to him."

The maid came back in with the fruit. The girl waited for her to leave, and then picked up an apple and looked at it. "First," she said in a calm voice, without raising her head, "he complimented me on your beauty."

"On *my* beauty!" cried Mariagrazia, flattered.

"Yes. Then he asked if I would go with him to his studio. I asked him what he was studying, and he told me that he dedicated himself mostly to the female nude."

"So, what's wrong with that?" intervened her mother. "If he's an artist . . ."

"Wait. . . . So, in all innocence I ask him whether he draws or paints. He just laughs and says in that voice of his, you know? affected, he says, 'Signorina, I don't even know how to hold a pencil in my hand. . . .' 'Oh! Well, then what. . . ?' I ask, and he laughs again. 'Come with me,' he says, 'come with me anyway . . . and as far as being nude, you can be sure *something* will come of it.' And at the same time he's, you know, he's *winking*." Carla interrupted her tale at this point and stared at her stupefied mother with comic gravity, then suddenly, ridiculously, winked at her. "Like that," she said, "and then he asks me if I'll do it. I answer him 'no' very dryly, and he . . . he acts like he's absolutely flabbergasted and cries, 'You can't be telling me this would be the *first time!*' Understand? He thought I was in the habit of . . . going to studios. Naturally I didn't even answer a word, and the whole thing ended right there."

An appalled silence ensued. Mariagrazia, very dignified and rather ridiculous, as if Pippo in person had been disrespectful to her right at that moment, insulting her or, even worse, bumping her down off of one of her august and dignified heights, was the very incarnation of surprise and indignation. Michele was looking dreamily at Carla; her story had caught him by surprise, right in the middle of his moment of deepest indifference. Now he wanted to convince himself that Pippo was a bastard and that his sister's honor had been deeply offended, but he couldn't manage to do it; it all slipped out from under his examination, remaining distant and extraneous to him. It was as if he were trying to work himself up over the fate of Lucrezia — young, beautiful, and good, but so *ancient* — violated by the dissolute Tarquinio.

"It's outrageous," he thought; but at the same time he realized that he had no idea just what was so outrageous about it.

At last their mother seemed to retrieve the ability to speak; she twisted her mouth in disgust and gave vent to this vehement insult: "The scoundrel!"

"The fact is, Mamma," added Carla, still without raising her head, "that a lot of people speak badly of me."

She felt enormously calm. Soon, she thought, the biting tongues would triumph; she would have run off with Leo, or she would have been caught in the act, confirming her guilt; that's what always happened. And between these ideas of resignation and scandal, all her faith in a new life was extinguished.

"If they didn't, Mamma," she added sadly, "why would Pippo have talked to me that way?"

Michele couldn't tear his eyes away from his sister. She seemed inoffensive, innocent, and depressed, he was moved to observe, but beyond that he knew nothing. "Let's see," he thought, realizing the absurdity of the question even as he asked it: "let's see, shouldn't I get indignant?" He felt cold and speculative as he examined Carla; she seemed seductive to him, and he felt he could understand Pippo's lust better than the girl's indignation. "She's a beautiful young woman," he thought, with superficial casuistry. "Pippo's taste can't be faulted, that's for sure . . .

he's got a good eye." And then, who knows? Possibly it *wouldn't* have been the first time, possibly Pippo was right. He pictured, in an amateur and completely passionless fantasy, his sister in some man's arms: naked, disheveled, her legs wrapped around him, her body pressed to his breast . . . or sitting freely on his knees, half-naked. . . . It was very possible. After all, she was a woman, too; she must have her lusts and desires, her longings. And her body was extremely developed; why shouldn't her temperament be developed, as well? He recalled having seen her one day by mistake as she was coming out of the bath. He had been left with the impression of a long, white, curved back under the large, indolent head with its wet mass of hair, and of something like a pale, heavy acorn — a breast — which her bather's bent position caused to swing forward under the dark pelt of her armpit. "Susanna at her bath," he had thought, discreetly withdrawing . . . and now Pippo . . . hmm, that Pippo . . . he really didn't have bad taste, after all.

Lost in these ironies, he had said nothing; but now, all of a sudden, he realized that he must speak, and understood that he must express, in the particular imperious tone required by these sad circumstances, an adequate and sincere indignation. Otherwise, he would sink back as always into that fatal indifference that kept him from acting and living like other men. He had played with his inner fantasies enough; now he *must* attempt to be truly tragic and sincere for once. "It's now or never," he thought.

He looked at his mother. "He *is* a scoundrel," he echoed, feeling his blood run cold at the sound of his own voice, as detached and banal as if he had just said, "Good morning," or asked the time of day. He brought down his fist on the table. "But I," he shouted, with a strident and solely exterior vehemence, "am perfectly capable of going over to his place and slapping him around a little." He raised his eyes and saw himself in the Venetian mirror hanging on the opposite wall. Was it his or someone else's, that face with the hypocritical eyes looking up at him under their lashes as if to say, "No, you are not perfectly capable"?

His mother hadn't even seemed to notice this fraternal outburst of indignation. "Everyone knows what they are, anyway,"

she was saying, "*nouveau riche* . . . nouveau riche and nothing more."

But Carla had heard him and she turned around. "Thanks very much," she said, "but I've already put him in his place. It's better just to leave it to me."

Her calm fed Michele's need to get angry. "Leave it to you!" he cried, observing to his relief that he already felt considerably more sincere. "Don't you think that a couple of words from me would make him understand better how grossly mistaken he is?"

"I'm asking you as a favor," repeated Carla, "leave it to me." It was the first time she had ever seen Michele in this unexpected guise of the vengeful brother, and she thought he seemed awkward and exaggerated, like a bad provincial actor. "And if he knew I'd slept with Leo," she thought, perturbed, "what would he do?" She stared at him. He had fallen silent and was bending his lustrous, impeccably combed head over the table; he said nothing and appeared to be thinking, rolling the bread in his fingers to form little balls; nothing in his attitude reflected his violent proposal. "What would he do?" she asked herself again. A subtle discomfort warned her that there was something phony in the way he had acted — that fist on the table, those heated words — though she wasn't sure why. When Michele raised his eyes again she seemed to read a sad and shameful secret in them, and she shivered. The phantasmagorical white fog returned to clutch at her trembling heart; the world turned white again. Somewhere in the fog her mother was speaking.

Dinner was over.

"So, Mamma," asked Carla, lighting a cigarette, "what are you going to do today?" She waited for the answer with a certain degree of anxiety. "As long as she doesn't suggest I go with her," she thought. She wanted to spend the afternoon with her lover; already she understood that she wouldn't be able to do without him. Almost instantaneously, habit had taken over from the longing for a new life, and she felt an avid and painful desire to return to that room and find herself with that man once again.

"Me?" answered her mother in a detached and distant tone. "I don't know . . . I think I'll probably go shopping." She was silent for an instant, lowering her glance to the burning tip of her cigarette. "How about you?" she asked, her deluded, middle-aged heart beating hard: this day would be hers; her lover would come back to her and to his old but secure love, as he had other times in the past (and the memory of those experiences filled her with hope and greatly consoled her) after his fleeting lapses.

"Me?" replied Carla, in the same detached tone her mother had used. "I've been invited to tea by Claretta."

They both fell silent, lowering their eyes to conceal their pleased, modestly triumphant glances. The same expression of relief and serenity washed over the mother's aging face and the daughter's childish one; both of them held in their hearts the image of their communal lover, and at that moment both of their souls reached out to him sweetly, as if to tell him, with a contained and satisfied joy, "There, see . . . it's all taken care of . . . no one, my dear, no one will disturb us."

They stood up and walked out of the dining room. The mother entered the living room first, shivering and rubbing her chilled hands together; right away she cried out, in a tone of surprise, "Oh! Merumeci is here!" She went over to him and took his hands in her own. "Have you been waiting for us long?" she asked. Then Carla walked in and she, too, exclaimed with a face and voice full of gladness, "Oh! Leo's here!"

Michele came last. He greeted Leo with a gesture, stopped to light a cigarette, and walked out again.

"So," said the mother, sitting down and rubbing her hands together even more vigorously, as if by doing so she could express her contentment, "so, what good wind has blown you our way?"

"Not a wind, exactly . . . my car," replied Leo, joking feebly, and the two women burst into the nervous, cordial laughter of sated people who have eaten dinner and now listen willingly, in the intimacy of a comfortable yet cold living room, to moronic stabs at wit.

"I received," he added more seriously, looking at Mariagrazia, "your business letter and I wanted to telephone you . . . but I knew the phone was disconnected. . . ."

"And you came over instead," she concluded, and turned toward Carla to say, "Listen, go tell the maid to make four coffees instead of three."

Carla got up and left with her eyes lowered.

"And now," said her mother with a flattering smile, assuming a more intimate attitude, "tell me . . . have you thought about that answer you were going to give me?"

"Yes," replied Leo, contemplating the lit tip of his cigar with the greatest attention.

"What's the matter?" asked his lover in an uneasy, insinuating tone and immediately getting to her feet. "What's the matter, Lulù?" Her face turned anxious, tender, and excited, as if she wished to extract a confidence and make a gesture of intimacy at one and the same time. She walked up behind him, put her arms around his neck, and bent her head to brush her cheek against her lover's. "What's the matter?" she repeated.

Annoyed, Leo leaned his head to one side. "Nothing's the matter," he answered, still staring at his cigar. The woman took one of his hands and passed it over her face, nuzzling it like a loyal dog, her nose cold and her lips soft. "Do you love me?" she asked in a low voice before he could finish his sentence, but then abruptly changed her tone to nonchalance, as if she had intuited the dangers of sentimentality. "I'll come over today," she said coyly, "and you'll be sensible, very *sensible*." She was unconsciously repeating the same words she had uttered the very first time Leo had invited her over to his place, using some common pretext. "Very sensible," she had said then, flashing a brilliant smile as she entered the vestibule of her lover's apartment. Fifteen years had passed since that day, and that hypocritically invoked common sense had surfaced at last; very sensibly, Leo was attempting to free himself from her embrace.

"And we'll be good," she added, attentively kissing his limp hand, "we'll be *good* little children." She bit his thumb conscien-

tiously and then licked her lips. "*Good* little children," she repeated with an avid expression and a greedy voice, already savoring the pleasurable ritual implied by this phrase. It was what she said (with a shudder of joy, holding up an admonitory finger and attempting to assume the expression of a pouting baby) every time, after she had stretched out all fat and white on the yellow coverlet of the bed, she called her lover to come over; and he would respond to her happily, making the same admonitory, frenetic gesture and saying, "We'll be *good* little children," after which their lascivious and complicated lovemaking would begin.

But Leo shook his head. "I have to tell you, Mariagrazia," he murmured without the slightest embarrassment, "that we can't get together today. I have an extremely urgent business deal to take care of. It just won't be possible." He gazed at his cigar.

A stupid, painful expression of disappointment squeezed the woman's face like an unloving hand; still, she kept a tight hold on her tenderness. "That means," she said hesitantly, "that we can't see each other today."

"Right."

Her grip on him loosened and her hands slid up over his chest to rest on his shoulders; her face turned suddenly hard. "You can't see *me*," she hissed, injecting her low voice with an extraordinary intensity, "but you can see sluts like Lisa! For *those* kinds of women," she added, "anything is possible . . . and to hell with your urgent business affairs . . . you doll yourself up . . . you shiver and shake . . . you're so hot you boil. . . . Boil, Lulù, go ahead and boil!" She clenched her teeth and pinched him hard on the arm.

Leo shrugged his shoulders furiously and rubbed his offended arm, but said nothing. Instead he contemplated the gleaming tip of his shoe, first with one eye and then with the other; he seemed to be very absorbed in this occupation.

"But you know what I say?" said Mariagrazia suddenly, staring hard at him. "That you're right, completely right, absolutely right . . . and it's *me* that's stupid, it's *me* that's the idiot, I don't even know how to *live*. But you," she added proudly, standing up very straight and arranging her face in a rigid expression of dignity,

fluttering her hand in a farsighted gesture, "can leave it all to me. You know what they say, all knots come to the comb in the end . . . you can't get away with everything. . . . Tomorrow you'll see." She walked off a little ways to observe the effect of her threat: none at all.

Holding the tray full of coffees, Carla walked in.

"Michele's gone out," she said. "Leo can drink Michele's coffee." She filled the cups, offered them to the others, and sat down. All three drank in silence for a while.

"I have some news that should please you," said Mariagrazia finally, setting down her empty cup, "I saw your Lisa this morning. . . ."

"*My* Lisa?" interrupted Leo, laughing. "*Mine?* Why is that? And since when?"

"Few words suffice to the wise," said the mother, with a stupid expression that was meant to be subtle. "And she charged me," she added, not feeling a bit like she was lying, "to give you her most heartfelt, most affectionate, her *fondest* greetings."

"That's very kind of her," answered Leo, not smiling, "but I don't understand, dear woman, what all this is supposed to mean."

"Oh, don't worry . . . you understand me perfectly," said Mariagrazia, becoming ever more subtle, as if she could exclude Carla from comprehending the conversation, "in fact you understand me all too well. Now take my advice, and don't miss any of your appointments! It would be such a shame if you did." Her voice and lips were trembling.

Leo shrugged his shoulders without saying anything.

"What are you talking about?" asked Carla, leaning her whole upper body forward very stiffly; an irrational turmoil was making her heart beat fast and taking her breath away. She longed to stand up and leave those two people, walk out of that living room, escape from that atmosphere.

"We're talking about . . . ," explained her mother, forcing herself to seem nonchalant and fiddling nervously with her necklace of fake pearls, "business matters. Our Leo," she added, raising her

voice, gazing into the air, and playing more frantically with her necklace, "is a *business man* . . . terribly busy . . . a real wheeler and dealer . . . everyone knows that. Oh, oh!" She burst into laughter, trembling all over, and broke her necklace; they could hear a dry clicking sound as the first pearls fell to the floor. Sitting up stiffly, her back rigid and her hands motionless on the arms of the chair, the mother let the necklace come apart and the pearls roll down her breasts to gather in the hollow of her lap; she was very dignified, theatrical, and even, in her innate absurdity, tragic. Then suddenly, as if her own thread had broken, she began to weep; two muddy tears welled up from her mascara-rimmed eyes and slid down her thickly powdered cheeks, leaving two wet tracks down which two more tears slid. Meanwhile the pearls continued to fall, rolling into her trembling lap like the tears down her face; her whole position was rigid, with great folds here and there like a statue, and the things that were falling, pearls and tears, seemed to mingle on that rigidity of body and face, both contracted, just barely trembling in pain.

"To hell with neurotic women," Leo had thought as he watched the disintegration of the necklace. Now that his lover was crying, a hateful embarrassment was making him uneasy. "To hell with tears," he thought, trying to fix his attention on the rocking tip of his foot as he had before.

Meanwhile, Carla had stood up. "Why?" she asked. "What's happened?" Her voice was cold and she wore an expression of boredom; Leo had the impression that the girl, too, was fed up with all her mother's whining. "To hell with tears," he thought again. In the meantime, Mariagrazia was keeping her daughter at bay with a slight gesture of her hand and head, as if loath to abandon her stiff, theatrical attitude of sorrow.

Right then Michele walked in. He was dressed to go out in hat, gloves, and coat. "There's a woman asking for you," he said to his mother. "She's got a box with her . . . I think maybe she's the seamstress . . ." But he stopped in midsentence, seeing her tears.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing . . . nothing," answered his mother. She stood up

hurriedly, letting the pearls fall from her lap to the floor, and blew her nose noisily. "I'll be right there," she added, and she left the room, red-faced and a little stooped, like someone trying to hide something.

"What happened?" insisted Michele, looking curiously at Leo, who simply shrugged and replied, "Nothing . . . she broke her necklace . . . and then she cried."

There was a silence. Carla stood still beside her mother's empty armchair; Leo looked down at his shoe; motionless in the middle of the room, Michele stared at the man with irresolute and embarrassed eyes. He felt neither pity for his mother nor hatred toward Leo; he felt useless and superfluous. For an instant he experienced a violent desire to react, interrogate, argue, protest. Then, not without an acute sensation of humiliation and tedium, he said to himself that, after all, none of this had anything to do with him.

"Do as you like," he said brusquely. "I'm going out." And he left.

"Come here, Carla," Leo ordered, even before the door was fully shut, with a clumsy, excited attempt at nonchalance, "here . . . next to me."

"Did you sleep well?" asked the girl, coming over to him.

"Great!"

He reached out his arms, wrapped them around her waist, and drew her to him. "You're coming with me," he murmured. "You'll tell her something . . . a friend, a visit . . . and you'll come home with me." He clutched her more tightly to him, interlocking his fingers low on her body where her large, muscular thighs met the twin spheres of her buttocks as if welded to them, a sharp line recognizable even under the pleats of her skirt.

"And this morning?" he added, just to say something. "Did everything work out all right?"

"Yes," she answered, looking down — she wasn't sure whether with fear or repugnance — at the head of the man sitting there talking to her without raising his lowered forehead, without lifting his eyes from her lap, as if the dialogue were taking place between

him and what lay between her thighs, as if nothing about her interested him except this one, least-noble part of her body, "no one guessed anything."

"It was early," he said without changing position, as if talking to himself. Finally he shook himself out of his immobility, raised his eyes, and drew the girl down to sit on his knees. "Aren't you afraid anymore," he asked, looking at her with a stupid, obtuse expression, "that someone might come in?"

Carla shrugged her shoulders. "By this time," she said in a clear voice, her mouth suddenly filling up with saliva, "what would it matter to me?"

"Well, now, let's see," insisted Leo, amused, "what if . . . right now your mamma came in, what would you do?"

"I'd tell her the truth."

"And then?"

"And then," she said in an insecure voice, with the anguished sensation that she was lying in respect to a more profound truth, and playing with the knot of his tie, "I'd go off with you . . . I'd go live with you. . . ."

Flattered by her earnestness, whose causes he misunderstood, Leo smiled. "You're a dear little girl," he offered, hugging her. They kissed; they broke apart. "We have time to be together from three until seven," he said. Actually, he wasn't overenthusiastic about this scheme; despite his excitement, he intuited dimly, as he squeezed that big young body, that his own forces would soon begin to fail to satisfy Carla's furious sensual greed. It was a precise and unpleasant sensation of, how could he put it? impotence. It was as if in order to satisfy him, he had been offered whole casks overflowing with wine, immense tables groaning under the weight of all kinds of delicious foods, and apartments disgorging the most beautiful women in the world, all lying down and piled up on top of each other like so many beasts. "From three until seven," he thought ironically. "What in the world will I manage to do?" He looked at himself in the mirror over Carla's shoulder: bald in front, heavy red face, cheeks more puffy than fat, to which the unshaved stubble of his beard added its own metallic blue

reflection — middle age. "I couldn't care less," he concluded serenely, with a vivid sense of reality. "When I've had enough, I'll say so." Lost in these thoughts, he was passing a distracted hand over Carla's neck. "How hot you are!" he exclaimed.

She said nothing, gazing attentively at her lover's hard, red face.

"Why was Mamma crying?" she asked at last.

"Because I told her I couldn't see her today."

"And will you do the same thing," asked the girl gently, "to me one day, Leo?"

"Why?" The thing that was most interesting and amusing to Leo at the moment was the contrast between the caresses Carla was receiving — not without pleasure, to judge from the trembling of her docile body — and the indifference, or better yet, the sad dignity of her face and conversation, "as if her body had nothing to do with her," he thought, greatly cheered. After a moment of silence, Leo raised his eyes to look into hers. "What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"About the day," she answered, aware to some degree that she was being untruthful, "you'll tell me you can't see me anymore."

"What nonsense!" snorted Leo, lowering his head again and resuming his studious caresses. "What do you have to do with your mother?"

"You say that now," continued Carla, "but later?" She herself didn't know why she was talking this way; in truth it didn't matter very much to her to know whether her lover would eventually abandon her or not. What she wanted was to feel certain that her own destiny would not parallel her mother's, and the real meaning of her question was, "Will I be able to have a life that's different from Mamma's?"

The man said nothing; he was attentively crumpling and pushing up her skirt. "And what do we have here?" he asked, touching her leg with one finger.

"A garter." She bent her head so that her forehead bumped against the hard forehead of her lover. "So . . . do you love me?" she asked.

Leo stared at her in surprise.

"What I mean to say is," she added hurriedly, "you never really loved Mamma, but you *do* love *me*, don't you?"

A lightbulb went on in Leo's mind. "She's jealous of Mariagrazia! I get it . . . she's jealous . . . jealous of her own mother!" Proud of his perspicacity and flattered by such rivalry, he grinned. "Don't you worry," he said, "don't even give it a thought . . . it's all over with your mother, understand? All-o-ver!"

"That's not what I mean. . . ." And Carla was already trying to explain her own obscure feeling when the door to the living room opened. "Let me go," she murmured, twisting out of his grasp, "here's Mamma." She freed herself with a single lithe motion and slid to the floor.

Her mother, newly tidied and made-up, her face serene and a package in her hand, came in and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Gathering," replied the girl. On her hands and knees on the carpet, her head lowered and her hair hanging in her face, she was gathering up the fallen pearls with alacrity, while Leo sat motionless, contemplating her with amusement, watching her high, round, mobile buttocks above her hollowed back and almost absent head.

"It wasn't the seamstress," said her mother. "It was a woman selling material and cushions. . . . I bought one."

"One what?" asked Carla, straining to reach a pearl that had rolled under the couch.

"A cushion," explained her mother. "Look," she added, pointing to the corner, "there's one over there." She was pointedly ignoring Leo, keeping her freshly powdered face averted from him.

"I've seen it," said Carla, still on her hands and knees. But why did she feel this need to literally abase herself, to stay low, to slide, to hide, with her hand full of pearls and her eyes dilated and fixed in sorrow? She didn't know. She stood up, somewhat flushed, and spilled the pearls into an ashtray.

"Let's see," she said.

Her mother unwrapped the package and showed off her new

acquisition: a square of blue silk on which the usual Chinese dragon with flaming mouth and bristling tail had been embroidered in brilliant reds, greens, and golds.

"Nice," said Leo.

"What do you think?" Mariagrazia asked her daughter, pretending to ignore her lover's judgment.

"I think it's more or less useless," said Carla rudely. "We have a house full of this stuff. I don't know where you'll find room to put it."

"In the atrium," proposed her mother humbly.

"Well, anyway," said Carla more kindly, with a sudden rush of compassion, "it's not bad-looking at all."

"You think?" asked her mother, with a weak, self-satisfied smile.

Carla moved toward the door. "I'm going to get dressed," she said. "Leo, wait for me . . . we can leave together."

"It's early," yelled her mother, looking at the clock and then running after her.

"Doesn't matter," answered the girl, already halfway out of the room.

"No, no!" cried her mother. "No. . . ." And the two of them left, arguing, squawking and waving their arms like two big frightened birds, in a slamming and banging of doors.

Left alone, Leo dumped his unlit cigar stub, stretched his arms and legs, yawned, and finally pulled a nail file out of his pocket and began to clean his nails. He was still doing it ten minutes later when Carla came in.

"Well, Leo," she said, pulling on her gloves, "shall we go?"

"All right," replied Leo in English, standing up and following the girl. In the vestibule he indulged himself in the extravagant, mock-serious burlesque he was so fond of. "May I," he inquired with a bow, "have the pleasure and the honor of your company, Signorina?"

"You may," said Carla, blushing a little and smiling despite herself.

They went out laughing, bumping into each other, leaping

with faunlike agility and grace down the marble steps yellowed by the recent rains; Leo's automobile, sitting low on its big wheels, was stretched out in the driveway under the sun.

Laughing and joking rowdily, the two of them walked to the gleaming car and climbed in swiftly, first Leo, then Carla. They settled into their seats.

"Nothing you've forgotten?" asked the man, attentively pushing the starter button.

"Nothing," answered the girl. Her sorrows and fears had evaporated in the cold, clear air; sitting beside Leo, she reveled in the bright blue sky, the fresh-washed world, the shining automobile.

The car started up and slid rapidly between the bare trunks of the trees lining the avenue; and their drooping branches, the sun, and the wind passed one after another over those two motionless heads. An identical childish wonder, an identical ruddy and shining youthfulness filled both their faces. They seemed uninvolved with the ride itself, seemed rather to be watching themselves in the glass of the windshield where, superimposed on the varied confusion of park and sky, a few of their features were reflected at random: their eyes, their mouths, Carla's childish cheeks, Leo's felt hat — detached and suspended in the void like a mirage, impossible to comprehend.

13

MICHELE HAD GONE OUT to visit Lisa. All morning the idea of this meeting had hidden behind his every thought, creating the same sort of unease that grips a group of people, all of whom know something and none of whom dares speak of it first. All morning the memory of himself kissing her hand the night before in the darkness had occupied the lower levels of his consciousness, surrounding his every thought with a bleak uncertainty. He understood dimly that the essential question that morning was not whether to devote himself to this or that particular activity, but to figure out whether he should go back to Lisa or not; that what really mattered was not reading, writing, speaking, living, that is, in one way or another, but making love to Lisa; and finally, after dinner, he made an excuse and went out.

His true reason for leaving the house was transparent to him the moment he stepped outside and looked up at the sky, which had been clear a few minutes earlier but was now filling up with a white mass of clouds threatening a fine rain. "Well, it's obvious," he thought calmly, closing the little door in the gate to the park behind him, "that I'm not out for a stroll or a cup of coffee. No, I

have to convince myself: I'm on my way to see Lisa." He felt it was very strong of him to be fighting his own hesitation like this and to be, in a certain way, bravely accepting circumstances that no effort of will could possibly transform. That obdurate hypocrisy and childish pride that had made him think for just one instant that Lisa was picking back up with her old lover had been useless. Worse than useless; they had become a burden, obliging him to continue in a mistaken direction. Now he understood that his ironic bow at the door, directed at Lisa, disheveled and breathless, had not been suggested by any real feeling; he could just as easily have come in, sat down, and talked to them, or he could have accepted their affair with good grace and serenity, or he could even have carried Lisa off, tearing her out of Leo's arms. But instead, with the instinct of a comedian forced to improvise his part, he had chosen that ironic attitude as the most appropriate, or rather, the most natural and customary in the circumstances: a word or two, a bow, an exit. But once he was back on the street he had felt no jealousy, no pain, only an intolerable disgust at his own versatile indifference, which permitted him to change his ideas and attitudes every day the way other people change their clothes.

So the importance of this upcoming visit was obvious to him; it was paramount, the ultimate test of his sincerity. If he failed he would either remain in this provisory condition of doubtful questing, or set foot on the opposite path, the path everyone else took, on which actions are not supported by any faith or sincerity, but are valued for themselves alone and accumulate in stratifications on top of the forgotten soul until they suffocate it. But if he passed the test, everything would be transformed: he would rediscover his own solid reality the way an artist rediscovers the inspiration of happier times. A new life would begin for him — the true, the only possible life.

He turned onto a broader street and found himself by the stop for the streetcar that went to Lisa's neighborhood. Should he wait for it or not? He looked at his watch; it was still early, it would be better to walk. He started off again on foot, picking up the thread of his thought. So, to recapitulate, there were two hypothetical

outcomes: either he succeeded in his aim to live honestly, or he adapted to live like everyone else.

The first hypothesis was perfectly clear: it was a matter of isolating himself with a few true ideas, a few truly felt sentiments, a few truly loved people — if they existed — and beginning to live, on these slight but solid foundations, a life faithful to his own principles of honesty. And the second hypothesis was this: nothing would change at all except in his own defeated spirit; he would adjust as best he could to the situation as if to an ugly house going to ruin, shoring it up here and there, since lack of money made it impossible to build a new one. He would let his family sink down into poverty or be kept by Leo, and he would resign himself (though it would utterly humiliate him to settle for such consolation) to his filthy little liaison with Lisa. *Porcherie*, obscenities, baseness, pettiness, lies — who didn't shove them into every corner of existence as if into the corners of an empty house? Farewell clear life, limpid life! He would become Lisa's lover.

And the house? And the mortgage? He would have to make a deal with Leo: "You give me enough money to keep me and my family going, and in exchange I'll give you . . ." But really, what was left that Leo hadn't already taken? Let's see . . . just a minute . . . there was Lisa . . . with whom . . . with whom Leo had just tried in vain to revive his old relationship. Right! Of course! There was Lisa . . . so: "You give me the money, and in exchange I'll convince Lisa. . . ."

He seemed to see how it would go.

One evening he would hem and haw for a while and then speak to the woman; she would protest. "Do it for love of me," he would plead with her then, "if you love me you have to do it." Finally she would resign herself to it and maybe, who knows? she might not even mind too much taking back her old lover. "All right," she would answer, not without launching a look of disdain at Michele, "bring him over. But don't think I'm doing this for your family . . . I'm only doing it for *you*." He would embrace her and thank her warmly. Then he would go into the anteroom to

call Leo. "Come on in," he would tell him, "Lisa's expecting you." And he would lead him by the hand and thrust him into the woman's arms. But where would Leo give him the money? Right there at Lisa's place, right under her eyes, or somewhere else? Somewhere else. Then he, Michele, would slip away discreetly, closing the door behind him, wishing them goodnight, and go to wait in the anteroom in his turn. What a long, interminable night he would pass, sitting in the vestibule listening to the sounds from the next room where the two of them were in bed; he would doze off, jerking awake every once in a while only to find himself still there, opposite the overcoat hanging on its peg, revealing the presence of the man still in bed with his lover; what a night without end! And toward dawn, Leo would leave without thanking him, without looking him in the face, just barely allowing him to help him on with his coat. And Michele would go to lie down in Leo's place on the rumpled and filthy bed next to Lisa, who would be half-naked and sleeping, sunk into the dark exhaustion of pleasure as if she were heavily drunk. And it would be neither the first nor last time; Leo would come back frequently, every time Michele needed more money. "Even this," he concluded distractedly, "would be a solution." But he felt wearied to death, as if all these fantasies had been real events that had happened. And what if Leo didn't want anything to do with Lisa, or Lisa with Leo?

Then . . . then . . . there was no one left to save the scene but Carla. Perfect! Even Carla was a resource. If it was going to be necessary to live this way, he might as well sink all the way to the bottom. So, there was Carla . . . to marry off, yes, to give to Leo in marriage. It would be a business marriage, a money marriage, of course, but then so many were and they seemed to be the ones that worked out best; love could come later . . . and even if it didn't, things wouldn't be that bad . . . Carla could console herself in any number of ways, Leo wasn't the only man in the world. All right. But . . . but . . . what if Leo didn't want to give him any money unless Carla became his *mistress?*

"He's capable of that, too," thought Michele, "quite capable of

that." He stopped and stood still for a moment; it seemed to him that his head was spinning; a weariness and hopeless disgust were weighing him down and his heart trembled. But implacably, he resumed both his walk and his thoughts: "Onward, onward," he thought, wondering dimly at his ability to discover ever new degradations within himself — when would he come to the end? "I have to sink all the way to the bottom," he thought, smiling wanly. So, if Leo didn't want to get married . . . and this hypothesis was quite probable . . . in that case, another type of agreement would have to be made between the two contracting parties. Leo would give him the money, but this time, in compensation for Carla's virgin youth and beauty, he would have to give him two or three times as much as would have sufficed for Lisa, aging and used up as she was. Different merchandise, different price. And he, Michele, would surely be charged in exchange (what one could bring oneself to do in this kind of atmosphere, balanced on this kind of slope!) with the task of persuading his sister. A difficult task; Carla must have some sort of principles, or else, who knew? she might love somebody else; very difficult. There were two tactics to consider. He could spill everything out to her at once, using all his powers of persuasion and invoking the honor of the family and the inevitability of poverty if she refused, and by the suddenness and violence of his pressure win the battle in one fell swoop. Or he could prepare the girl slowly, making her understand him little by little, building up an obsession . . . with a word one day, and another the next . . . dropping repeated, insistent hints until she herself figured out what was required of her. Which of these two tactics was best? The second, undoubtedly. Much easier to let her come to understand certain things on her own than to say them to her outright. And then, faced with the hardships of poverty, skillfully readied by hints and allusions, not to mention Leo's seductions, Carla, weak and alone, would surrender at last. "It happens to so many girls," he thought, "why not to her?"

Walking slowly and gazing at the ground, he seemed to be able to imagine, with hallucinatory lucidity, how this seduction

would take place. It would be a gray day like this one, a dead, dull day without sun, without movement. And just like today, Leo would have come over, and he would have invited them, him and his sister, to go for a ride in the car . . . no sooner said than accepted. And after the ride, where would they end up for tea? At Leo's place, right, at Leo's place, where Carla would go gladly, reassured by her brother's presence. All three of them would get out of the car and walk up to the door; they would climb the stairs slowly together, first the girl, then the two men. . . . On the threshold, as Carla was taking off her hat in front of the mirror in the vestibule, the two men would shake hands to seal their mutual agreement. And after they had visited awhile and admired the house, there they would be, all three of them, in the bland afternoon light in Leo's small living room — all three of them with different thoughts and expressionless faces. Then Carla would serve tea, standing up, and the two men would receive the drink, the floury cookies, the sugar and milk from her hands, as they would receive a smile devoid of suspicion from her lovable mouth and a clear, untroubled look from her eyes. All three would sit near the window, because the sky would be turning overcast and shadows would be starting to invade one end of the room; all three would drink and eat together . . . and they would also talk to each other, in the afternoon silence of the house, the two men looking each other in the eyes, the girl laughing in her ignorance, joking out loud. And when tea was over, in that moment of silence and dreamy repleteness following any satisfied appetite, Michele would look at Leo and Leo would return his look. The man's eyes would move swiftly to rest on Carla's docile, slightly lowered head, and then glance at the door. And he, Michele, would understand and would get up slowly. "I'm going out to get some cigarettes," he would say, walking out with a strangely confident step and his head held high, leaving those two behind him, his sister and the man, two black and motionless figures in front of the window filled up with the gray of the sky.

He would go into the vestibule and put on his coat, and then he would leave, closing the door with caution. The interminable

hours of that afternoon would pass, one after the other, without Carla, without Leo, without anyone, on the streets or in some small café or movie house. And in the evening he would go back to his own home and find Carla and maybe even Leo at the family table, and he would scrutinize their two faces without being able to tell from any look or any sign whatsoever what had happened in that place, between those four walls, after he had left. A mad chase through the dark apartment, in a noisy chaos of overturned chairs and doors opening and slamming shut? A brief struggle in the shadows of the little living room in front of the twilit window? Or a deathly resignation in the face of inevitable ruin, long foreseen and finally accepted?

He would never know; despite that afternoon and all the other days on which this lucrative and guilty scene would be repeated; their common life, by dint of habit and convenience, would go on as it always had, easily incorporating one more lie, one more dishonest intrigue, and *avanti!* it would go forward. Or else one day these shameful secrets, like worms in some great, decomposing corpse, would be revealed in an explosion of egos that would cause the final collapse. And they would find themselves naked in front of each other; and that would be the end, the real end.

Feeling as though he were suffocating, he stopped and looked into the shop window in front of him without seeing anything. Now he had truly plumbed his future to its depths: nothing left to sell — neither Carla's innocence, nor Lisa's love, nor his own courage — nothing left to hand over to Leo in exchange for his money. After these fantasies, which were no steeper than the slippery incline down which his existence was sliding, the awful dryness parching his mouth and chapping and cracking his soul made him want to scream, made him want to weep. He felt weary and filled with a deathlike disquiet, as if he had truly left Carla in Leo's apartment only a few minutes before; as if now, in that same closed apartment, the shame he had dreamt of were being enacted to the letter: the struggle, the chase, the embrace. And in those same colors and forms — the arms reaching out and the bared breasts, the one naked body lying prostrate beneath the

dark, curved stain of the other, the closed and violated eyes — which had appeared as if lit by flashes of lightning in the fevered skies of his imagination.

He was now so weighed down by weariness and disgust that he felt an instinctive need to wash himself (not that he could have said why), a pitiable need for pure water, as if the fresh streams he would bathe in could actually flow through the meandering bends of his soul. Brooks murmuring through grasses, vivid white waterfalls splashing in one continuous roar from the heights of cliffs, cold torrents foaming over their graveled beds, streams emerging from the snowy face of the mountain at the moment of thaw, snaking down separate, secret ways to meet and merge in the valley: so great was his sorrowful craving that all the sweetest, coldest water in the world seemed not enough to slake it.

He started walking again. He understood now that although he could tell himself, "Luckily, they're only ideas," it would mean nothing, would never suffice to restore him to innocence. From the turmoil of his spirit, from the bitter taste in his mouth, he understood that he had *lived* those fantasies; that it would never be possible to look at Carla through fraternal eyes again or to forget having imagined her so indecently, engaged in the kind of wanton behavior associated only with whores. It was too late by now to go back to more tranquil visions: to think is to live.

But he had seen, he had *experienced*, what he would become if he did not learn to conquer his own indifference: faithless, loveless, and alone. He could save himself only by living out this, his unbearable situation, with sincerity and according to traditional methods, or by breaking out of it altogether. In the first case he would have to hate Leo, love Lisa, feel disgust and compassion for his mother, and affection for Carla — all feelings he had never experienced; in the second case he would have to leave and go somewhere else to find his people, his places, that paradise where everything — all feelings and gestures and words — would fit the reality from which they had sprung.

He thought he had glimpsed this paradise of concreteness and truth two years before in the tears of a prostitute he had stopped on

the street and taken to a hotel bedroom. She was a small, trifling girl, her body amusing in its naive disproportion between the big, clumsy curves of her breasts and buttocks and the slender, curved hollow of her back, so that when she was naked she appeared to be preening, showing off her rosy rotundities the way a peacock shows off his tail. And she was offering him these sweet yet shopworn seductions while swathed in miserable little scraps of black scarf draped slantingly across her body as if she were costumed for *carnevale* — ragged, improvised mourning weeds, she had confided to him on the hotel stairwell without a shadow of sorrow, with that indifferent simplicity with which one refers to any natural phenomenon; her mother had died the week before. But this tragic loss, which had left her, she said, alone in the world, didn't keep her from looking for a man to share her solitude each night; you had to live. In the bedroom she had staged her little pretence of modesty, but gaily, with a certain fresh, glad spontaneity. The room was small and spare, and she had left a little of everything on the floor, like a fugitive freeing herself from her armor bit by bit in order to run more swiftly, but this armor was light — the black veils, the flimsy skirt and slip, her intimate underclothes — and had taken refuge, dressed only in stockings, in the warmest, darkest corner, next to the radiator. She had had to be coaxed out, and even then had simpered affectedly, swinging her breasts and hips in such an awkward way that it looked like she was about to make a curtsey. She had come out protesting, covering what she could with her hands, and had cautiously slipped into the bed with a mysterious, seductive smile that had seemed to promise who knew how many delicious surprises; but then, when Michele had tried to press her to use her purely professional abilities, she had refused and finally, when he had insisted, had burst into tears. They weren't dignified tears, or tragic tears, or one of those hysterical outbursts accompanied by screams and contortions. She cried as a baby cries: huge tears and violent sobs that shook her whole body and in particular her two light, tender breasts, which were like two innocent travelers forced to bounce up and down vigorously and constantly by some bizarre horse.

He stared at her in astonishment, unable to understand her swift passage from joy to grief. Finally, after many questions, what she seemed to be telling him was that, at the very same moment he had asked her to show him all her professional skill, the thought (in that head beside him, so near, yet so far from his own) of her mother being dead was so strong, so unbearable, that it had caused her to burst into noisy tears. She had made these confused explanations in a sad, drowsy voice while the boy on top of her, still dazed and amazed, had stared at her without speaking, and then she had carefully blown her nose and dried her eyes with the edge of the sheet. She had gone back to being serene, gay, even zealous, as if she had wanted to be forgiven for the awkwardness of her grief. Everything had gone well and an hour later they had separated at the hotel door and each gone their separate ways. They had never seen each other again.

Now he recalled that weeping as an example of a sincere life whose threads were all woven together. Those tears sliding down her painted face, spilled just at that moment, had welled up from the secret *fullness* of her life, the way flexed muscles surface suddenly under the skin. Her soul was entire, all one piece with its vices and virtues, and so participated in the quality of all real and solid things, that is, of revealing a profound and simple truth at every moment. But he was not like that: his indifference was a flat white screen on which sorrows and joys passed like shadows without leaving a trace. And this inner inconsistency was reflected back to him and communicated to him by his external world: everything around him was weightless, worthless, as fleeting as the play of light and shadows. By a splitting-off process that could, it seemed, continue indefinitely, those phantoms that should have traditionally impersonated his family members (his sister, his mother) or his beloved (Lisa), divided, doubled, and detached themselves according to circumstances and his imagination. So it was easy for him to see Carla as a calculating girl, his mother as a stupid and ridiculous woman, and Lisa as a slut, not to speak of Leo, who changed aspect completely from hour to hour, depending on what people said and on Michele's own too-

subjective impressions, so that one minute he thought that he hated the man, and the next that he loved him dearly.

One single sincere action, one act of faith would be enough to sever him from this chaos and put those values back into their habitual perspective, he thought; and in consequence, this visit to Lisa assumed enormous importance for him. If he succeeded in loving her, all the rest would be possible, too, even hating Leo.

He raised his eyes and realized he had walked beyond Lisa's street, so he turned around. And now his evil spirit began to torment him. "And if you really," it asked him, "knew how to put things back where they belong, do you think you would be better off? Do you think that becoming a real brother, a real son, a real lover, a real man like so many others, egotistical and logical like so many others, would signify *progress* in comparison to your present conditions? Do you really think so? Are you absolutely sure about it?" All questions without answers. "Don't you think, instead," continued the voice of doubt, "that the path strewn with doubts and perversities that you're taking would carry you much farther? And don't you think it would be an act of cowardice on your part to become like all the others?"

"And where do I think it will get me," he thought, caught between irony and despair, "where do I think it will get me, becoming sincere?"

He was looking in front of him with dazed eyes, spellbound by his own reflection in the glass of the shop, when all of a sudden he seemed to see the consequences of sincerity. In the center of the perfumery's window, among the blond, sparkling bottles of cheap eau du cologne, on top of a stack of pink and pale green soap bars, an advertising dummy was drawing the attention of the passersby. Painted in vivid colors, cut out of cardboard, and constructed after a human, rather than a fantastic model, it had a motionless, stupid, cheerful face and large brown eyes full of candid, invincible faith. It was wearing an elegant bed jacket and seemed to have risen that moment from bed; and without ever tiring and without ever varying its stupid smile, it was stroking a razor blade back and forth over a strip of leather; it was sharpening it. There

could be absolutely no connection between the banal action it was performing and the joyful satisfaction on its rosy face, yet the advertisement owed its efficacy to precisely that absurdity. That disproportionate happiness was not meant to point out the man's imbecility but the quality of the razor; was not meant to demonstrate the advantage of possessing a mediocre intelligence, but that of shaving with a good blade. However, on Michele, immersed in his thoughts, it produced the exact opposite impression.

He felt he was looking at himself, surrendered to sincerity, and receiving from that smiling cutout the answer to his question, "What good would it do me to have faith?" It was a discouraging answer. "It would," the dummy seemed to be saying, "give you a good razor blade. Also a happiness like mine and everyone else's, humble and stupid in origin, but nice and shiny . . . and then, what really counts is how well it shaves." It was the same answer any one of those respectable people on the street beside him would have given: "Do as I do, and you'll become like me," offering up their own stupid, clumsy, vulgar selves as examples, as goals to be reached at the peak of the grim mountain of his thoughts and renunciations.

"That's what good it would do you," insisted his evil spirit, "it would turn you into a stupid, rosy-faced dummy like this one right here." Spellbound, he watched the cardboard puppet sharpen his blade in a continuous movement, with little automatic jerks — one, two, three — and he felt like punching it in the face and smashing its radiant smile.

"You should be crying," he thought, "crying great big tears." But the dummy smiled and sharpened, smiled and sharpened.

Michele tore himself away with an effort from this fascinating spectacle (there really *was* something mad and hallucinatory about that continuous movement) and turned onto the street where Lisa lived. Absurd words and phrases were dancing in his head: "Here he is, Lisa," he repeated to himself, "here's your poor dummy with his razor."

14

THE DARK HALLWAY WAS FILLED with the odor of food particular to apartments of that kind; he had smelled it before in other, similar places. Lisa had obviously just gotten up from the table herself and had come to open the door with a cigarette between her lips and a dazed and excited expression on her face — due, perhaps, to all the wine she had drunk. "In here . . . in here," she kept saying, without responding to his greeting, and she guided him toward the boudoir, closing half-open doors as she went. He saw a bedroom, its air close and stifling, its bed unmade and rumpled, a dark little kitchen full of utensils, and the dull, dusty living room with which he was already familiar. "It's nicer in here," she said, leading him into the boudoir. A dazzling white light was pouring into the room through the two curtained windows; the cloud cover must have thinned out in the sky, and the unbearably bright reflection from behind the panes of the windows was almost blinding.

They sat down on the sofa together.

"So, how's it going?" asked Lisa, offering him a box full of cigarettes. He took one without raising his eyes or altering his

worried expression. "I'd better start right away," he thought, looking up at the woman from under his lashes. Lisa's face was thickly powdered, and she was wearing an old, yellowed white blouse and a gray skirt, stretched out of shape by long wearing. A bright but not very clean tie, badly knotted, drooped from her neck; enamel buttons decorated with some kind of dog's head adorned her cuffs. In contrast to this masculine attire were her full breasts, straining against the flimsy blouse, and the blond-and-pink flesh of her shoulders, exploding behind its veiled transparence and emphasized by the vulgar white straps of her slip.

"Not well," Michele answered at last.

"Not well?" A turmoil — she wasn't sure if it came from the wine she had drunk or from some other cause — was making her heart beat hard and fast, interrupting her breathing, and every so often flushing her grave and excited face with a sudden surge of blood. "Why not?" She gazed at Michele, hoping he would remember how he had kissed her hand in the darkness the day before.

"I don't know." He put down his cigarette and stared at Lisa for a moment. "I've been thinking about a number of things. Shall I tell you what they are?"

"Yes, yes, tell me," she said, making a broad gesture of assent and assuming the expression and position of someone eager to listen with interest and even, one might say, with love.

"Who knows what she thinks I'm about to tell her," thought Michele ironically. "Maybe that I love her . . . ha! Of course, that's exactly what she's expecting. . . ." He picked his cigarette back up. "I have to tell you," he began, "that I find myself in a curious position with regard to you all."

"You all who?"

"You all in the family . . . you, Leo, my mother, my sister. . . ."

She pretended to scrutinize him with a penetrant glance. "With regard to me, too?" she asked, taking one of his hands in her own in a natural way, as if she were unaware of it. They looked at each other. "With regard to you, too." He squeezed the woman's fingers mechanically. "I should feel," he continued, en-

couraged, "a certain emotion, a certain sentiment for each of you. And I say I *should* only because time after time I realize the circumstances require one. It's like going to a funeral or wedding — in both cases a certain attitude of joy or sorrow is as obligatory as what you wear to the ceremony. I mean, you can't laugh walking behind a coffin or weep bitterly while the bride and groom are exchanging rings. . . . It would be scandalous. Worse, it would be inhuman. So a person who's indifferent, who feels nothing, has to pretend — and that's how I am with all of you. I pretend to hate Leo . . . to love my mother . . ."

"And?" asked Lisa avidly, seeing him hesitate and interrupt himself.

"And nothing," he answered. He felt sad and annoyed. "If you're waiting for me to talk about you!" he thought, looking at Lisa's face. "Only," he added, and his voice trembled in complaint and in protest, "I don't know *how* to pretend. So, you see, by dint of false feelings, false gestures, false words, and false thoughts, my whole life turns into a failed play. *I can't pretend*, do you understand?"

He fell silent for a moment, while Lisa contemplated him in obvious disappointment. "But," he concluded, confused and discouraged, suddenly hearing his lonely voice echo unheard in the silence of the boudoir, "none of this interests you and you can't understand it, anyway. I could talk to you for an entire day and you wouldn't understand me." He lowered his head.

Finally he heard the woman's voice, speaking to his forehead in a pretence of inspiration and intimate confidentiality: "I *would* understand you, my poor Michele . . . I'm sure I'd understand you." He seemed to be hearing the same voice *he* would use if he were to decide to tell Lisa he loved her. "Well, well," he thought, with bitter irony, "both of us are in the same boat." He felt a hand settle on his hair and was seized by disgusted pity for himself and the woman as well. "Oh! poor Lisa," he said to himself, "how badly you want to teach me to act in the play!" But when he raised his eyes, he encountered a face and look so imperiously sentimental that they frightened him. "Has the moment already

come?" he thought confusedly. He was like a man waiting for surgery and imagining the long preparations that would precede it who sees instead, the very moment he lies down on his cot, the surgeon's knife gleaming in the air above him. He looked at the woman's face: supplicant, half-open lips, troubled eyes, flushed cheeks. And he understood, yielding little by little to her prayer, that once again life was imposing a false attitude on his indifference. Then he felt Lisa's fingers lightly squeezing his own as if to invite him to a decision; he leaned over and kissed her on the mouth.

They embraced for a long time. Passing clouds dimmed the bright light that had filled the boudoir only moments before, and the walls faded and rapidly chilled. And on the sofa between the two windows the two of them, sitting beside each other with their torsos turned only enough to allow for the kiss, were motionless, rigid; only their mouths were joined. If it hadn't been for those confused and greedy lips, their correct positions would have implied a conversation, not an embrace. Michele's arms were hanging limp at his sides and his eyes were wide open, wandering idly over the opposite wall, while Lisa, her hands gripping his, moved her head every so often like someone drinking, coming up for air for a second, and then drinking again with renewed greed. At last their lips broke apart and they looked at each other.

"And now," thought Michele, staring dazedly at the woman's confused, excited, serious face, "and now?" He saw an expression of gratitude flush her already flaming cheeks. Her wet lips were parted in pleading admiration, and an almost religious adoration, lacking only the gesture of the open palms to complete its piety, welled up in her eyes. She reached out a hand and passed it through his hair, murmuring, "Dear one . . ." in a false, trembling voice.

He lowered his eyes. Lisa was balanced precariously with her legs underneath her, but now, without seeming to be aware of it and continuing to stroke his head, she drew closer to him by scooting painfully forward on the couch; and as she did so, her skirt slid up to reveal, little by little, a fat thigh sheathed in a sag-

ging, rolled-down stocking. He was assailed by a strong unease and irritation, he didn't know whether from scorn for himself for having let himself be dragged into that embrace or because of the hypocritical contrast between her affectionate caressess and words and the immodest nudity her underhand movement was so consciously revealing. "Who does she take me for?" he thought in disgust. The faint lust aroused in him by their kiss vanished completely; he drew back and awkwardly rose to his feet, his eyes fixed on Lisa.

"No," he said, shaking his head, "no, it's no good. . . ."

Astonished, almost scandalized, Lisa looked back at him without covering her naked thigh or attempting to curb her arousal. "What's no good?" she asked. This coldness of Michele's was an insult to her heat and abandon. "Stupid boy," she thought irritably. "We started off so well . . . and now look . . . now he's getting up." She saw him shake his head again and repeat, "It's no good." So she reached up and grabbed one of his hands in an uncertain gesture. "Come here," she said, trying to draw him back down beside her, "come here . . . sit down by me . . . tell me what it is that's no good."

He hesitated and then sat down. "I've already told you," he explained in a bored voice, gazing attentively at something behind Lisa's head and pretending not to notice her nervous caresses and emotion-filled eyes. "I've already told you I have the same problem with you as I do with the others."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning . . . that just as I can't hate Leo . . ."

"Even now, after what I told you?"

Michele looked at her. "I have to tell you," he began, with a certain amount of embarrassment, "that I was only pretending not to know what you told me about Mamma. Actually I already knew it."

"You already knew it?"

"For at least the past ten years." He leaned down to pick up a letter opener that had fallen off the coffee table, and as he was putting it back in its place, he was seized by a hysterical desire to

tell the truth. "And so, you see, just as I can't hate Leo, the history of whose affair with my mother I could tell you in every detail . . . that's just the same way that I can't love you. And it's always the same reason — indifference, always indifference. So," he concluded irritably, "rather than pretend to fall into your arms, to be swooning with passion for you, rather than making you declarations of love . . . given that I can't carry it off . . . I prefer to do nothing." He fell silent and looked at Lisa; seeing her so perplexed and troubled, he felt a kind of scornful compassion. "Make an effort to understand me," he said gloomily. "How can I do something I don't feel?"

"Try. . . ."

He shook his head. "It's no use. It's as if I went to Leo and said, 'Listen, my friend, I don't hate you — in fact I like you very much, I'm actually quite fond of you. And I'm very sorry about this, but there's nothing I can do about it — I'm going to have to hit you,' and then beat I him to a pulp."

"But love always comes afterward . . . ," she murmured stubbornly, with a lack of modesty that seemed incredible to Michele, "when you know each other better."

"We know each other all too well."

Lisa paled; no one had ever rejected her so harshly. She was afraid that her "adolescent" was about to escape from her forever, and for a moment she had a crazy impulse to throw herself at his feet like a supplicant before a god. But she simply protested, "You can't be serious."

"Never more so."

She moved up to him and took one of his hands. Her heart beat hard and an unreasoning anxiety flushed her cheeks. "Don't be awful," she insisted in a hesitant voice, stroking the hand she was holding. "Look, don't you feel anything . . . anything at all for your Lisa? Tell me . . . you'll do me this favor, won't you?" She wound an arm around the boy's neck. "Michele . . . you'll let yourself love me a little, won't you?" A fierce flush, a flaming excitement distorted her face and her voice turned sentimental and suggestive; as she thrust her body forward to-

ward the boy, her knee touched his leg, but he shook his head.

"Try to understand me," he repeated, greatly irritated by the obstinacy of her lust. "What would happen to this love of yours if I . . . without caring too much about how I really felt . . . if I . . . *took* you, like a whore . . . if I just threw you down on the couch? Understand me. . . ."

"But we haven't come to the point of . . . throwing me down on the couch yet . . . ," she said with a stupid, flattered laugh. After a moment's hesitation, she threw her arms around his neck in a tender, forceful gesture, at the same time letting herself fall back onto the sofa. This first movement succeeded; caught by surprise, Michele didn't have time to resist and fell forward with her. But looking down at that flushed and excited face, those eyebrows arched imperiously over her lust-glazed eyes, and feeling the whole weight of that body pulling him down by the neck, he was seized by rage and an intolerable disgust. He jerked back his head, planted the palm of his hand right in the middle of that pleading, demanding face, and in a single thrusting movement freed himself from the embrace and rose to his feet.

"If you really want it that much," he said, scowling and mechanically straightening his crooked tie, "then go back . . . go back to Leo."

Lying on her back on the sofa with her face in her hands and her breasts heaving, Lisa was pretending to a pain and humiliated shame neither of which really existed; but at the name of her old lover she sat up and stared at Michele with wild eyes, pointing at him with an accusatory finger. "Leo! Did you say Leo? That I should go back to *Leo?*" she shouted, ignoring her tousled hair and hiked-up skirt. "And if I'm not mistaken, you also told me you can't manage to hate Leo, didn't you? Even knowing what you know?"

"Yes," he stammered, taken aback by her sudden fury, "yes. But what's that got to do with it?"

"*I* know," she said, bursting into brief, nervous laughter, "*I* know. . . ." For an instant she said no more, swallowing her impatience with her saliva. Then, "You know what I say to *you?*" she

burst out anew, leaning forward from the hips and fixing him with those delirious eyes. "That there's only one good reason for you to hate Leo, the same reason I can't go back to him. . . ."

"My mother?" risked Michele, discomfited by her accusing finger pointed at his face; but Lisa erupted into scornful laughter.

"Your *mother!* You really think we're talking about your *mother?*" she cried, between bitter bursts of laughter. "My poor Michele, your mother's been *hors de combat* for quite some time . . . *quite* some time. . . ."

He stared at her and it seemed to him that he was looking down on her from a very high altitude, with a superiority derived more from the repulsed compassion he was feeling than from any greater purity on his own part, seeing in that vengeful figure a misery even lower and blinder than his own. He had an impulse to lean down, smooth back the wild hair, fold down the accusing finger, but she didn't give him time. "No," she went on, still fixing him with those eyes that seemed to see beyond the boudoir, beyond the house, to the figures moving through her memory, "no, dear . . . *not* your mother, someone else . . . guess . . . guess!" She gave a little nervous laugh, smoothed her hair and skirt, and sat back more comfortably.

"You," he offered.

"Me?"

She made a strange gesture, as if she were falling down out of the clouds. "Me? But my poor Michele, I just told you that there's a good reason for me not to go back to Leo. . . . And do you know *who* the reason is? Do you know who it is?" A name trembled on the tip of her tongue; she was about to utter it but then restrained herself. "No," she said, shaking her head, "no. It's better if I say nothing." Now that the first moment of arousal had passed, Lisa had fallen back on her habitual duplicity, in which, as if she were playing a subtle and fascinating game, she found the most powerful consolations for her misery. "I wouldn't want anything awful to happen because I spoke out. . . ." She lit a cigarette, lowered her eyes, and stared at the rug, the perfect picture of someone who has decided not to talk.

"Listen, Lisa," said Michele, "say whatever it is you want to say, since I can see you're just about bursting with it. Get it over with."

He went up to her, thrust a hand into her hair, and pulled back her head. Faced with the cruel, stupid fixity of the eyes he was looking into, he felt he was baring some hardened, unhealable error, and the same disgusted pity he had felt before swept over him again. "If I loved her," he thought, letting go of her hair, "she wouldn't be this way." He sat back down.

"What manners," complained Lisa in a slow, stubborn tone, running her hands through her hair, "what manners!"

Michele looked at her. "It's not their fault," he thought, "it's mine. They need me to have feelings . . . and I don't have any."

"Do you want to know everything, then?" asked Lisa.

"Yes. And hurry it up, would you?"

A moment of silence.

"You did say, didn't you," began Lisa somewhat hesitantly, "that you'd like to hate Leo but you can't?"

"Yes," he replied, "and I also said," he added in embarrassment, "that I'd like to love you but I can't."

She waved her hand curtly. "Don't worry about me," she said coldly, and then sat a minute in thought as if gathering her memories together before speaking. "It's not a long story," she began at last, lowering her eyes to stare at her hands. "Yesterday . . . do you remember? when Leo and your mother and sister came home from the dance? There was no light and so everyone was looking around for candles . . . and then your mother dragged me into her bedroom to show me that new dress she ordered from Paris. It's a nice dress but it has a little defect at the waist. . . . Well, anyway, at a certain point, I'm not sure why, I decided to leave and . . . . I open a door, I take a step forward . . . and guess who I see in the anteroom?"

Michele just looked at her. She had been telling her tale in a cold, parsimonious voice, never ceasing to contemplate her hands, and he had been listening distractedly, without any particular interest, as if to any other banal story. But now he recalled that all these preambles were leading up to something to do with

Leo, that these concentric circles were drawing ever more tightly around that name, and he was assailed by an obscure and menacing anxiety so abrupt that it took his breath away.

"Leo . . . ," he almost gasped.

"Yes, Leo," repeated Lisa, calmly and ostentatiously flicking the ash off her cigarette, "Leo with Carla. In each other's arms."

They stared at each other. Motionless, Michele looked at her, not in surprise, but with that dazed fixity that makes the eyesight double and triple like flawed glass; Lisa stared back in curiosity, fear, and a certain ridiculous pride, the pride of someone who has struck a great blow or uttered a great word.

"What do you mean, 'in each other's arms'?" he asked at last.

"In each other's arms," repeated the woman cruelly, irritated by this incomprehension as if by the last struggles of a wounded beast who refuses to die. "The way everyone does it . . . her on his knees, mouth to mouth . . . wrapped around each other kissing, in other words."

Silence.

Motionless, Michele stared down at the carpet (pink, like everything else in the room, and unraveling at the edges), where Lisa's two feet were planted, pressed together; farther back was the couch. "Kissing," he repeated to himself, "kissing. . . . This is extraordinary." He felt an impulse to shout, "This is fantastic!" He was highly entertained, and his curiosity was piqued by the unforeseen turn things had taken. He felt neither indignation nor disgust — on the contrary — if anything, he felt stung by a lively desire to hear a more detailed explanation, to find out something more.

This state of mind lasted a few seconds. Then, as he was already asking her questions, he realized suddenly, almost fearfully, that he was once again devoid of any of the feelings that this grievous fact should have inspired in him; the thought of Leo and Carla embracing provoked no more in him than a mundane curiosity. This new downfall did not move him. The supreme and unexpected test of his sincerity had failed; those two in each other's arms had become, in his eyes, just like so many other, un-

known couples, no longer two individuals with distinct personalities. "Let's see," he thought, "we're talking about *Carla*, my *sister*. . . . Lisa saw her in the arms of that man, my *mother's* lover! Isn't it horrible? Isn't it revolting? Let's see . . . isn't it almost *incest?*" But Carla and Leo in their incestuous embrace remained distant from his postures of distress and disgust; he couldn't touch them.

He looked at the woman and understood from her eyes, from her whole attitude, that she was looking forward with delight and curiosity to a good, juicy scene of outraged virtue and familial indignation. "Anger . . . rage . . . hatred," he thought feverishly. "All the riches in the world for a little bit of sincere hatred." But his spirit remained lifeless and heavy, like lead: no anger, no rage, no hatred. Carla weeping, naked and lost; Leo in his cruelty and greed — all that shame, all that distress, and nothing was enough to shake him.

Then he was struck by a desperate idea. Since the last test had failed and this more violent stimulant had not managed to galvanize his deadened spirit, wouldn't it be better to decide once and for all to pretend *everything* — love, hatred, indignation — to act, without holding anything back, broadly, even grandly, like someone with enough to throw it around? A mad idea! "It's the end," he thought, and felt that he was truly renouncing forever the unattainable comfort and relief of the spontaneous, limpid, continual springs of life itself. "It's the end. Still, *something* has to happen . . . something *will* happen."

He rose to his feet. "No!" he said, beginning to pace up and down the boudoir in the role of a worried and indignant man. "This is too much . . . it's impossible to go on like this. This is the last straw!" He felt cold and ironic, and it seemed to him that his voice was not resolute enough. He decided to modify it. "Leo thinks that he can get away with anything," he went on more firmly, as Lisa sat slumped and motionless, watching him without speaking, "but he's wrong." "No, that's too weak," he thought, continuing to pace back and forth, "I need something stronger. I am the brother whose mother's lover has sullied his sister's honor." All these familial, virtuous words made a ridiculous

impression on him, as if they were absurdly archaic. "I have to come up with something harsher . . . even if it means exaggerating. . . ." But despite these false ironies, his sorrow and weariness were growing ever greater; he wished he could leave this low comedy behind him, kneel before Lisa as if before the woman he loved, and tell the whole truth: "Lisa, I'm not being honest. My sister doesn't matter at all to me, nothing matters at all to me, I don't *care*. . . . Lisa, what should I do?" But Lisa was not the woman he loved and would not understand him; like everyone else she expected, even demanded, the natural and necessary attitude from him.

"What will you do?" asked the woman.

He stopped and looked at her, striving to change the calm in his eyes to a hallucinatory stare. "What will I do? What will I do? What will I do?" he repeated rapidly. "It's clear what I *need* to do . . . go over to that bastard's house and take him by the neck." He thought Lisa seemed surprised by his violence.

"When?" she asked, giving him a sharp look through the smoke from the cigarette dangling from her lips.

"When? Tomorrow . . . no, today . . . right away." He took a cigarette from the table and lit it, while Lisa looked him up and down with a swift, perplexed glance.

"And what will you say to him?" she inquired.

"Oh! I'll speak to him very, very coldly," he replied, waving his hand, frowning and staring into the air under lowered brows like someone foreseeing his own fate. It was getting easier and easier to play his part. "Just a few words, and he'll understand this is nothing to joke about. . . ." Another glance from Lisa. "How idiotic I am," he thought. "But what repulses me the most," he went on, desperately hoping to work himself up and convince both himself and the woman, "is Leo's hypocrisy . . . his baseness. It would be one thing if he were really in love with my sister . . . that wouldn't excuse him but it would at least partly explain the thing. But no . . . I'm sure he doesn't love her, it's just the way he is. He liked her, he found her attractive, and he wants to have his fun with her, that's all. Now, apart from the fact that it's always vile to

abuse the inexperience of a young girl, it's three times as vile for a man to do it in cold conscience, especially considering the relationship he has with Carla and the rest of us! It couldn't be more . . ." — He searched for a word expressive enough to describe Leo's behavior — "more *slimy*. And then, as I said, if he had acted out of passion . . . overwhelmed by his own feelings . . . But there's no love there, no passion, no affection . . . nothing but lust and the most hateful, repugnant kind of deception, masquerading as pure, ideal feeling. No, it can be neither condoned nor understood. It can only be condemned!" Although he had started out uncertainly, he had grown more secure as he went along; but he uttered these last words with a strange and profound force that stunned even him. "And as far as Carla is concerned," he concluded after a moment, "she's not to blame. She let herself be led astray by that man."

Silence.

Sitting motionless on the couch with her head between her hands, Lisa considered the boy. "There's no doubt about it," she said at last, in a tone of vague approbation, "falsehood is a very ugly flaw."

"Hideous." He went over to the window. The sun had vanished, and a low, thick screen of clouds hung over the city. Lisa lived on the second floor, but the house had been built on a kind of hill, so that a vast panorama of roofs stretched out beneath her window. Chimney pots, tiles, terraces, garrets, and balconies, the whole scene spread out under the gloomy gray sky, had taken on a color somewhere between yellow and brown, to which the flawed glass of the window added the blurs and distortions of a faded and poorly painted set. Farther off, the smoke exhaled by the houses drifted up to the clouds to form a kind of fog in which the irregular profiles of the roofs and the forest of chimneys lost all perspective, thickened and merged. Just beneath the window the tiles were reddish, and tufts of grass grew between them.

Michele contemplated this landscape; it was the first time he had become aware of it and he couldn't tear himself away — all those roofs made a strong impression on him. "Lift them off," he

thought, "see what's happening inside the houses. . . ." Then a black cat glided swiftly from one balcony to another; he followed it for an instant with his eyes. "It's going to rain," he thought, looking at the gray sky, the humid and spacious distance.

He shivered and turned around. The faded boudoir and Lisa, sitting motionless in thought on the ragged couch, reappeared. He approached her. "I have to pretend," he thought, reattaching himself with an effort to his false reality. "I'd like . . . I'd like to sleep . . . but I have to pretend." There was no connection in his mind between pretending and sleeping, but the word "sleep" had come to him spontaneously, as an expression of the deathly exhaustion oppressing him.

"What time is it?" he asked abruptly. "Is it time for me to go to Leo's now?"

Lisa shook herself to life lazily and slowly and glanced at her wristwatch. "Four o'clock," she said, observing the boy attentively, "but it might be best if you phoned first to see if he's home." She got up and moved toward the door.

The darkness in the hallway was complete until Lisa flipped a switch and a dim yellowish light like a nightlight fell from the low ceiling onto the dark walls. The phone was attached to the wall at about eye level beside the living room door; beneath it was a directory, which Lisa rifled through rapidly before dialing. "But are you really going over there?" she asked doubtfully, turning toward Michele.

"Do you still doubt me?" he replied energetically, but it seemed to him that the woman's eyes were full of a malicious and perverse disbelief.

"No . . . not at all," she said, turning and dialing again. The phone rang shrilly; Lisa stood up on tiptoes and shouted in a guttural voice, "*Pronto! Pronto!*"; she waited a moment in attentive silence, then shouted it again. Michele contemplated the hallway: two closets, a sort of bookcase, empty, and some chairs. . . . Lisa had turned away from him, and her flimsy blouse, bathed in the yellowish light, exposed — even more clearly than it had in the boudoir — the abundant pink-and-blond flesh of her back, inter-

rupted by the two opaque straps of her slip. Devoured by shadow, her hips seemed less broad than before, her legs not so crooked. . . . He was observing all this with dreamy eyes. "Here I am in Lisa's apartment, in Lisa's hallway . . . ," he was thinking, "and I have to pretend . . . musn't relax for a minute . . . have to pretend." Without even knowing what he was doing, he went over to the woman and put his arms around her waist. "So," he asked in a phony, suggestive tone of voice, brushing the nape of her neck with his lips, "so, are you still mad at me?"

But someone was speaking into the telephone; Lisa gave Leo's number and then turned around. "Don't think about me," she said, giving him the same evaluating glance she had given him before. "You'd better be thinking about your sister and Leo."

"I *have* been thinking about them," he replied, disconcerted; but he let her go and leaned back against the wall. "I know I have to pretend," he thought, disenchanted, "but for how long?" That second glance of hers was enough; obviously Lisa still doubted the sincerity of his indignation. How could he convince her?

Now she was talking into the telephone. "With whom?" she was repeating, "with *whom*? With Signor . . . Signor Merumeci? Ah! *pardon*! I must have made a mistake." She hung the receiver back in its cradle and turned around. "He's at home," she said dryly. "You'll probably catch him if you go now."

They stared at each other. "She doesn't believe me," thought Michele, scrutinizing her with suspicion.

"So go," she added at last. The boy made a puerile gesture of restraint with his hand, as if to say, "Slow down . . . there's no hurry," but then he moved away from the wall and said, "I'm going . . . yes, I'm going."

"You don't *have* to go," said the woman in a hard voice. "You can pretend you don't know anything about it . . . personally, I don't care one way or the other whether you go or not."

In the vestibule she helped him slip on his coat and then handed him his hat.

"So," he said, "I'll come back tomorrow to make my report."

"All right. Till tomorrow."

But Michele was reluctant to leave; intuitively, he knew that Lisa didn't believe a single word he'd said. He wished he could swear great oaths, make grand gestures, utter profound words — convince her. He hesitated. "I'm sure," he said at last, taking the hand she was holding out to him, "that you don't believe I hate Leo, that he disgusts me."

Silence.

"In fact, I don't," she said simply.

"And why is that?"

"Just because."

Another silence. "What if I proved it to you," asked Michele, "with facts?"

"What facts?"

He hesitated again, reading both uncertainty and imperiousness in the expression of Lisa's eyes. "Good question — what facts?" he repeated to himself. He felt a slight, sudden fear that he wouldn't be able to name the "fact" that would manage to convince the woman of his sincerity; but then, putting her aside to think about his enemy, he discovered it spontaneously, the way you find something you've been seeking for a long time without knowing it: he would kill Leo. He liked this idea, not so much for its actual execution as for its efficiency, or what he supposed would be its efficiency, in impressing Lisa.

"For instance," he offered mildly, "would you believe me if I killed Leo?"

"If you *killed* him?" Lisa's first reaction was fear. Michele smiled, satisfied with the impression his words had made on her. "Yes . . . if I killed him."

But Lisa had already recovered her composure, having observed the boy's calm face, his eyes devoid of anger. "Then yes, I would," she said, with an ironic smile, "but the way you say it tells me you won't do it."

Silence.

"The *way* I say it?" thought Michele, irritated at having so spoiled his effect. "What way? Is there really a *way* to say that you

want to kill someone?" The curtain was falling, the play had failed; there was nothing left to do now but go.

"So you don't think I'm capable of killing Leo?" he insisted.

He watched as the woman burst out into laughter, not completely reassured, but certainly not frightened. "No, I . . . my poor Michele," she managed at last, cheerily and even compassionately. "That's just the kind of thing people say. But between the saying and the *doing* . . . And besides, I already told you, it's enough to look at your face to see that you haven't the slightest intention . . . . Anyway," she added, as if to stifle her last doubt, "if you had said it seriously, I wouldn't be letting you go off like this, out of my house." She opened the door and held out her hand. "Hurry up," she said, "or you won't even manage to see him."

"And if I killed him?" Michele repeated like a refrain, standing on the landing with a bitter smile on his lips.

"Then, yes . . . then I'd believe you," she replied, her own smile deeply incredulous.

The door shut between them.

15

WHITE LIGHT WAS POURING down from the skylight onto the stairway; the door was shut; he was surrounded by silence. "No one believes me," he thought as he left, "no one will ever believe me." He walked down a few steps, very slowly; a slight, painful uneasiness oppressed him, and despite his best efforts, he couldn't manage to resolve the sad confusion of his mind.

One after another, the figures and facts of his misery — Carla's seduction, Lisa's disbelief, his mother, Leo — appeared to him in abrupt moments of clarity like rents in a single landscape illuminated by flashes of lightning during a nighttime storm. "No one believes me," he thought, and then right afterward, "Carla has given herself to Leo." He saw once again, with a sense of humiliation, Lisa's ironic face in the crack of the closing door, then darkly divined Carla, half-naked and tousled in the arms of her lover. But if he tried to reunite these images, to gather these facts together and master them like a puppeteer skillfully holding the strings of all his marionettes in one fist, if he made an effort to consider the whole tangle he had been caught in coldly and

dispassionately, he began to flounder and suffocate. His weak thoughts were unable to frame bristling reality, his eyes unable to fully see, in all its parts and deep down to the bottom, the panorama of his life.

He tried to reason, to systematize. "Let me see," he thought, "let me see . . . there are two aspects to the matter, one internal, the other external. My indifference, my lack of faith and sincerity are internal . . . while all the events I don't know how to react to are external . . . and both aspects are equally intolerable." He raised his eyes as if to look at the two faces of his problem. "No," he thought uneasily, "it's my fault. I don't know how to live my life with passion." He walked down a few more steps; it was Carla's fault as well. "Carla," he wished he could ask her, "why did you do it?" And his mother's. . . . The fault lay with them all; it was impossible to discover the origin, the first cause . . . they were all guilty. He seemed to see them, all of them, there on the landing, leaning against the wall. "You're all poor miserable wretches," he thought. "I pity you . . . all of you . . . even you, Mother, with your ridiculous jealousies; even you, Leo, with your airs of victory. . . ." He seemed almost to see Leo, to take his hand. "Yes, I pity you above all . . . yes, *you* . . . who think you're the strongest . . . ah! ah! poor Leo." He wished he could say those words to him, his enemy, calmly like that. A kind of drunkenness seized him and he rolled his head back. "Poor things, you're just poor miserable wretches, that's all . . . poor things . . . now you're in for it . . . you'll see what'll happen to you. . . ." But at the door he realized that he still had his hat in his hand; and this trifle, this small distraction, was enough to knock him down from his position of superiority and collapse him. An unutterable rage and anguish invaded him. "It's *me* . . . the rest is just talk . . . it's *me* that's the miserable wretch," he thought. He had fallen low, he was back on earth; he jammed his hat on his head and stepped outside.

The houses were dead, the plane trees mute, the day completely still; a stony sky bore down on the curved roofs, and there was neither light nor shadow the whole length of the street, only the dry hunger of a storm. "Now let's go to Leo's," he thought, and

at this idea an uncontainable ecstasy possessed him. "Ah! You didn't believe I could kill Leo," he thought rapidly, over and over, "you didn't believe I could . . . but what if I *did* kill him?" He was walking swiftly, injecting his steps with great force, lending his whole body an irresistible certainty and decision. Absurd remarks were dancing in his head to the rhythm of his march: "Let's go, Lisa, let's both go murder Leo . . . then we'll cook him . . . we'll cook him over a slow fire." Or: "Leo, Leuccio, *Leuccino*, we'll kill you like a puppy, like a *cagnolino*." He gazed into the air in front of him with a cold and desperate smile. "And it's all over for you, too, Leo . . . such a fine career . . . such a glowing future . . . what a shame . . . I'll be the first one to cry . . . but what can you do? It's all over for you, too." He almost burst out singing, "*fi-ni-ta, fi-ni-ta, la bella vita*," to a famous, melancholy tune. He was walking very fast, with the rigid, direct steps of a soldier marching to battle.

It was a modest secondary street; here and there were little specialty shops with scanty displays in their windows. He noticed a flower shop offering funeral wreaths, a printing shop plastered with business cards of every kind, a carpenter's shop, a barber. "There!" he thought. "There you go, Leo! First I'll order you that splendid coffin, then I'll buy you that beautiful wreath, and I'll stick my business card in it . . . and the barber . . . the barber will give you a good close shave."

After the carpenter's shop there was a severe-looking building with the deep front door of a convent; as he passed, he glanced into the empty courtyard and glimpsed yet another shop, its window closer to him than its door. At first he didn't realize what kind of shop it was; the gleam of the glass seen from the side distorted the objects it held. Michele took a step toward it and saw GUN SHOP written in white letters on a brown background and a rack of hunting rifles. "And here's where I buy a gun," he thought, but he didn't pull back. Instead he hesitated in front of the door, then turned and entered.

"I'd like a handgun," he said immediately in a loud voice, leaning on the counter. He had done it; now he was seized by a tremendous fear that the dealer would guess his intent. He

assumed a cold, patient expression, eyes lowered and hands still, so that all he could see of the dealer was his torso, clothed in black, as he moved slowly between the counter and the shelves with the gestures particular to his calling. Under the glass of the counter Michele could see a great number of gleaming knives arranged against a red background, some simple and others complicated and laden with blades, some opened like fans, others closed and squat. He raised his eyes: the shop was small and dark, filled with glass shelves, some of which held racks of rifles and others dog collars; farther off on the counter he noticed a wooden block in which lead bullets were mounted in order of size, so that they looked like the sun and the planets. Now the shopkeeper, a tired, thin, grizzled man with slow gestures and inexpressive eyes, began to lay out handguns one by one on the glass, declaring the price of each one as he set it down in an even, monotonous voice: a hundred, seventy, two hundred and fifty, ninety-five. Some were flat and black, others rounded and shining — the first were automatics and the second revolvers. "That's the one I need for Leo," thought Michele ironically, looking at an enormous gun with a folding stock, a kind of machine gun hanging on the wall. By now his thoughts were calm and his actions spontaneous; he lowered his eyes to the counter and chose the cheapest without hesitation. "This one," he said in a clear voice, "and some ammunition." He took out his wallet. "I just barely have enough," he thought, setting the money down on the counter. There was a metallic sound. He picked up the package, put it in his pocket, and left.

"And it's off to Leo's," he said to himself. Now the still, gray air seemed to waver every so often and dissolve in ephemeral tears. At the street corner there was a sort of little repair shop, and on its threshold a mechanic in dirty overalls was taking the tire off a bicycle. It was hot. Michele couldn't hear a single voice anywhere. The heavenly tears distorted the seven-story houses as they fell; he could see the buildings writhe and fold, their windows flexing, but there was no trace of rain on the stones of the sidewalks — large, yellowish gobs of spit here and there, but no tears. Was he hallucinating?

He turned onto a broader, more bustling street, the street he would walk all the way down to cross the piazza to find himself on the street where Leo lived. There was no hurry; he walked slowly, like any idle stroller, observing the people, the movie posters, the shop windows; the gun felt heavy in his pocket. He stopped in front of a store and very gently freed it from its paper package and wrapped his fingers around its butt, feeling the strange, cold contact. The trigger. A light pressure and everything would be over, for Leo: one, two, three shots . . . and now he felt the barrel, and now the grooves. He clenched his teeth, clenched the handle of the gun . . . there! there! He seemed to see how everything would happen. He would climb the stairs and enter the living room; he would wait there with the gun in his hand until Leo asked, finally, "What's up, Michele?"

"Here's what's up," he would answer, and shoot right away. It would be enough for the first bullet to penetrate any part of the body, and it was a large target; Leo would drop to the floor and then Michele could aim at his head, bending over and pressing the muzzle of the gun precisely to the middle of the man's temple as he lay stretched out on the floor, his hands gripping the carpet, his face rolled back and the death rattle in his throat. What a strange sensation: Leo's head moving against the gun, his wild eyes staring at Michele. . . . Then Michele would shoot him again. The noise; the smoke; and afterward he would have to leave without looking back, leave that small room where the murdered man lay on the floor, impeccably dressed, with his arms flung open, beneath the white gaze of the windows. He would have to rush down the stairs before any of the other tenants saw him and come out into the street . . . the crowd, the movement, and up there, between the four walls of the little room, the dead man. . . . He would find a policeman (where were the police stations where one went to confess?), a traffic cop standing at an intersection, and he would tap him lightly on the shoulder. The policeman would turn, thinking Michele was a pedestrian seeking information. "Please," Michele would say peacefully, "arrest me. I've killed a man." The officer would look at him with

incomprehension. "I've killed a man," he would repeat. "Arrest me." The crowd would swirl around his words in all directions, cars would drive by; finally the man would accompany him, incredulous and confused, without taking him by the neck, without handcuffing him, to the nearest police station. A dusty room; the register; the guards; the old, cold stench of stale cigar smoke; the counter; the big, gray-haired, vulgar police chief; the interrogation — he had been in a police station once to report a theft . . . they must all be like that.

He turned away from the shop window and began to walk on. They would bring him to trial. His crime would be splashed all over the newspapers: enormous headlines, lengthy reports, photographs of Michele, the dead man, the "diligent" Officer of Public Safety who had arrested him, the scene of the crime; nothing would be missing, not even the X showing the exact spot where they had found the murdered man's corpse. There would be much morbid interest in the affair, and on the day of the trial the courtroom would be crowded with the eager public, elegant ladies and people of note in the front row as if they were at the theater. They would wait; the judge would come in — he could almost see him — a venerable, tranquil, rather distracted old man who would speak to him the way a teacher speaks to a student, talking down from the height of his dusty throne and inclining his head toward Michele, staring at him without severity from under the white arch of his eyebrows. And he seemed to be able to hear him:

"Accused, what do you have to say?"

At this, Michele would rise, all eyes upon him, and recount his crime. Seated comfortably, the ladies in the audience would follow his every sentence with the utmost attention, although every once in a while they might do something as frivolous as adjusting a rebellious hat or crossing their tired legs. From a silence so deep you could hear the buzz of a fly, Michele would speak, and speak sincerely, each of his words dense with that sorrowful truth that had always enclosed him in a special, separate atmosphere, like the ink that encloses the squid in its shadowy black-

ness when it is assailed. Little by little, as he was confessing his lack of sincerity and faith, his dilettantism, it would seem to him that the old judge had somehow moved closer, lowering himself to Michele's level while the gray courtroom was soundlessly emptying of people until only the two of them were left, the judge and him, on the dusty platform amid the squalor of the walls and the empty chairs. And he would still be speaking. "So," he would conclude at last, "I killed Leo without hatred, without sincerity, with a cold mind. I could have said to him instead, with the same indifference, 'Congratulations, my sister is a beautiful girl. . . .' This is my real crime: the sin of indifference."

Silence. The judge would look at him with curiosity, as if he were deformed. Finally there would be the deeply resonant sound of a chair being moved, as sonorous as the echoes in the naves of churches; the judge would abandon his throne and come toward Michele very simply, stepping across the dusty courtroom dais. He would be a short little man with big feet; his black robe would hang down to his heels as if to hide something monstrous; perhaps, from so much sitting on his throne to mete out justice, his legs had shrunk. A short little man, with a big benevolent head. . . .

"O judge . . . judge!" Michele would throw himself at the old man's feet.

"You are absolved of your crime," he would hear, after a moment of silence, "but you are condemned for your lack of sincerity and faith, condemned for life."

Inexorable verdict. And when he raised his head up again, he would suddenly become aware that he was back in the crowded courtroom before the distracted judge, between two armed guards. A dream within a dream; phantoms.

The reality of it would be different. They would provide him with a celebrated lawyer and laud him as a suffering and humiliated brother and son who had finally revenged his wrongs; they might even applaud him during the trial. The witnesses would testify. Ragged and slovenly, Lisa would tell, in her phony voice, how she had discovered that Leo and Carla were having an affair

and what a deep impression it had made on her; she would tell how Michele had disclosed his plan to kill Leo, and how she had not believed him.

And why had she not believed him? Because of the tone in which he had said it.

And how had he said it? Calmly, almost as if he were joking.

Did Michele know about his mother? Yes, he knew.

How had the deceased behaved in the home of his lover? Like the master of the house.

How long had his relationship with the mother gone on? For fifteen years.

And with the daughter? As far as she knew, only a few days.

And did the daughter know about her mother's affair? Yes, she knew about it.

What kind of relationship did the accused and the deceased have? They were friends.

Business? That, too.

What sort of business? She didn't remember exactly, but thought it was a matter of the mortgage on the house.

Was it true that the accused had been heard to say of the deceased that he was reducing them to poverty? It was true.

What were her reasons for revealing his sister's affair to Michele? Affection for the boy and friendship with the family.

What had the behavior of the deceased been toward Carla up until this time? Like a father's. He had known her since she was a child with bare legs and braids.

Did Carla enjoy a reputation as an honest, serious girl? No, she was generally judged rather harshly.

Did she believe the deceased had felt passionate love for the girl? No.

And on Carla's part? No.

Did she believe the deceased intended to marry Carla? No, not as far as she knew.

Was it true that the deceased did not conceal his relationship with the mother from her daughter and son? It was true.

And that there were frequent arguments between the two lovers? Yes.

Why? Because the mother was jealous.

Of whom? Of everyone.

Did the mother suspect the daughter? No, on the contrary. She had often confided that her lover entertained purely paternal feelings for the young girl.

One last question: would she ever have believed that the boy would be capable of such a crime? No.

Why not? Because he was too weak.

Then his mother would step up, dressed in mourning black, made-up, very dignified, insecure; she would walk right past the witness stand and go directly over to the judge as if he were an acquaintance. Interrogated, she would make a long story of it, starting way back at the very beginning of things. Her voice would be pathetic, her gestures theatrical, and all her black veils would be in continual agitation — all those black veils, as if she were in costume. Interrogated insidiously by the lawyers for the defense, who would hurl themselves on that prey like sharp-toothed sharks on a soft whale, his mother would finally reconfirm her attachment to the deceased, and when asked if it were true that he had stripped her of her estate, she would answer no.

And what did she know about Carla's seduction? That it had been madness, but let those without sin cast the first stone.

("So we're calling it madness," Michele's lawyer would underline ironically. Excited cries from every direction; energetic call to order in the court.)

And did she believe that Leo was planning to make amends for this madness by marrying Carla? (Uncertainty.) No . . . she wasn't sure.

(Sensation.) And would she have adapted herself to that situation, with that man in the house, her own lover and her daughter's as well? (Embarrassment.) No, but Leo had already thought of that. He had already decided to find Carla a husband.

(Laughter. Ironic observations.)

Was it true that the deceased had given a certain dowry to the girl? It was true.

("And in exchange," the lawyer for the defense would note, "he had made an early reservation for the *jus primae noctis.*" Another outbreak of excited cries; whistles and catcalls from the crowd; the public would take his part, and the judge would threaten to clear the courtroom; it always happens like that.)

Was it true that of late there had been violent altercations between Michele and the deceased? Yes, it was true.

And that one night Michele had thrown an ashtray at Leo? Yes, but it had hit her, on the shoulder.

And the reason for this? Michele thought, wrongly, that the deceased wanted to take advantage of the mortgage to rob them of the house.

And how had the deceased behaved on that occasion? Like a father, like a gentleman.

Was it true that quarrels broke out frequently between herself and the deceased? No, the most perfect harmony united them.

But the witness Lisa had implied something different? Of course. She had her own good reasons for slandering the memory of the deceased.

What reasons? Oh! Only one, but that was enough: she had been his lover.

(Sensation. "It seems to me," Michele's lawyer would comment, "that no one was safe from him!")

When was this? Before he had become her, the mother's, lover.

At the inquest she had accused Lisa of having instigated the crime. And now? Now she repeated her accusation.

Lisa's reasons? Reasons of jealousy and envy.

And the witness also accused Lisa of trying to corrupt Michele? Definitely. She was a shameless slut, an indecent woman.

(Uproar; admonition by the judge to use more moderated language; rebellion by the mother. "Yes, she's a slut!" she would scream. "A whore and a murderess!" Fresh admonitions.)

And was it true that her lover's coldness had caused her to suspect Lisa instead of her daughter? Yes, because she had noticed for quite a while that Lisa had been trying to seduce the man.

In other words, according to her, Lisa was the party most guilty? Certainly. She had instigated the crime, she had egged on Michele, it was she who was responsible for all of it!

And so, according to her, the deceased had also done well to seduce her daughter? No, but you know . . . human weaknesses . . . and besides, the fault couldn't have been all the deceased's.

And Michele? Michele was a poor irresponsible boy, Lisa's instrument. He was too weak to have done it by himself.

Last of the three women in his life would come Carla, a little thinner, paler, more womanly than she had been. Amid the frantic curiosity of the public, she would come forward, neither shy nor defiant. She would be wearing a little dress in some light color — it was morning — flesh-colored stockings, a bright little hat, and a fur wrap over her shoulders. She might be made-up; she would surely be elegant. The old judge would look at her without severity, as he had looked at Michele. She would step up and lean against the witness stand and answer the questions slowly. The public would be in a fever of curiosity, waiting greedily for the juicy details, overexcited; but after a brief consultation, the judge would order the court to be cleared and the trial to be continued behind closed doors. Disappointment in the crowd; murmurs and whistles. The courtroom would empty little by little. And there would be Carla, alone, a bright spot of color among the gray and black instruments of justice; and the interrogation would continue.

Was it true that of late a relationship of intimacy had sprung up between the witness and the deceased? Yes, it was true.

Did the witness know about her mother? Certainly, ever since she had been a child.

Since she had been a child? Yes, as a child she had seen them one day embracing in front of a mirror.

Did she know that the deceased could not or would not marry her? Yes, she knew that.

Did she know that the deceased had laid his hands on their inheritance? She knew that, too.

And notwithstanding the knowledge of all these elements, she had given herself to him? Right.

Why? Because.

How had the deceased behaved with her, like a man in love or a libertine? Like a libertine.

Then he hadn't loved her? No, he hadn't loved her.

In what way had the deceased first demonstrated his passion for her? One day when she was alone in the house, reading and bored, he had come in and talked to her, and little by little they had reached a sort of aroused intimacy, and then he had kissed her and invited her to go to his place.

And had she gone? Yes, the next day.

What had happened during that encounter? Everything.

And she had gone back again? Yes, every day.

Was it true that Lisa had surprised her in the anteroom the evening of the dance, sitting on her lover's knees and embracing him? Yes, it was possible.

Hadn't she been afraid at that time that her mother would discover her? No.

Hadn't she thought of how deeply she would disgrace herself by being with that man? No.

Why not? Because.

Had her mother hid from the witness her own intimate relationship with the deceased? No, on the contrary. She confided in her.

Had the deceased ever spoken to her about her mother? Yes.

How? Disrespectfully.

What did he say? That she was old and stupid, that he didn't love her anymore.

According to her mother, the deceased, despite his relationship with the witness, planned to give her a dowry and find her a husband. Was that true? No, it wasn't true.

How did she know that? Because the deceased had suggested that she abandon her family to go live in a little apartment where he could visit her whenever he wanted.

Would she have accepted? Perhaps.

Didn't the deceased think that Michele would stand in the way of this plan? No.

Why not? Because he said that Michele would calm down if he gave him a little bit of money.

And her mother? Her mother would make a scene but then she would calm down as well.

Did she know of any previous altercations between Michele and the deceased? Yes, one night the deceased had threatened to pull Michele's ears.

And Michele? Michele had thrown an ashtray at his head, but it had struck their mother instead.

Had her brother ever revealed his plan to kill Leo to her? Never.

How did Michele comport himself in family matters? He was weak and indifferent.

Then Carla, too, would step down, but first she would come over to greet him. He seemed to see her now: serious, embarrassed, with pleading, emotion-filled eyes. She would ask how he was and they would shake hands; then she would walk out, with the frivolous steps forced on women by high-heeled shoes, in her short little dress. And from the way she walked, with a careful and insecure modesty, and from the soft, swaying movement of her hips, from a thousand physical details, he could imagine the new life that her mother's ragged and undignified grief had allowed her to glimpse.

The three women in his life would disappear — his sister, his mother, his lover — each setting out on her own path.

But the trial would go on. Several days later the public prosecutor would give a forceful closing speech. After painting a dark picture of the corupt and corrupting environment in which the crime had occurred, and even conceding to Michele his particular

extenuating circumstances, he would nonetheless wholeheartedly endorse the theory of premeditation.

"Yes, members of the jury," he would exclaim at this point, banging his fist on the table, "we're talking about a premeditated crime! Michele gets the news from Lisa that Leo has seduced his sister, and he goes away mentioning, in a joking way, according to the witness, that he might kill the man. Clearly, then, it has all been decided, and Leo is already condemned. Michele doesn't go to Leo to ask for an explanation but to *murder* him, whether or not Lisa's words are true. Between her revelation of the seduction and the crime itself almost two hours go by; what is Michele doing during this time? The moment he leaves the woman's house, while he is still on the same street she lives on, he hurls himself headlong like a madman into a *gun shop* and buys a handgun for seventy lire, after which he wanders aimlessly through the city, abandoned to his own bloody thoughts and vengeful plans like a ship in a storm. Members of the jury, watch him! as he stops in front of the shops, the gun in his pocket, and gazes into their windows; watch him as he walks on, as he walks up and down Leo's street *several times*, watch him, finally, hesitating in front of that door, going in, climbing the stairs. Here he is, in his enemy's living room. Leo comes toward him, cheerful, affectionate, friendly, smiling at him . . . that *smile*, members of the jury, the smile of a man going all unawares to his death! He holds out his hand. Then Michele shoots; the man falls; Michele bends over and coldly, ruthlessly finishes him off with a shot to the temple. Afterward, with the calm demeanor of an inveterate criminal, he shuts the door of the apartment behind him and goes off to give himself up. . . ."

The orator would go on to analyze the obstinate, implacable desire Michele had nurtured to kill Leo, despite the fact that he knew that "Carla, as has been made clear in the witnesses' testimony, was *not* the pure, virginal, untouched maiden she led others to believe she was — quite the contrary — so that *seduction*, in the true sense of the word, had not taken place." The jurors would be deeply impressed. "Carla," the orator would go on

to explain, "is one of those girls who have never been innocent, who go with one man today and another tomorrow. She is a wretched example of our corrupt age." He would insist on explaining that it had very probably not been Leo who courted the girl, but the girl who had approached Leo, and that she had done so in a sort of morbid, insane rivalry with her mother. "Members of the jury," he would conclude at last, "no one has the right to take human justice upon himself, much less *divine* justice. But Michele dared to do this; Michele condemned his enemy and carried out his execution. This atrocious, this *cold* will to kill is his real crime. It was not an outburst of passion, members of the jury, it was not an explosion of righteous indignation; it was the preparation and execution of a bloody and long-contemplated plan. Remember this! Remember that for Michele, Leo was *already dead while he was still living,* while his place in the world of men was not yet marked by a tomb. And you, Michele," he would exclaim, turning toward the accused, "accept this condemnation as an expiation and purification, after which you will be allowed to return to your family and the world at large."

"Who knows," thought the boy at this point, "why lawyers, when they're talking, always think they can give the *tu* to the accused." He shook his head. "You're wrong, public prosecutor," he thought ironically, "you're wrong. Neither purification nor expiation, not even family . . . indifference, indifference, only indifference."

He smiled distractedly. Who would speak after the prosecutor? His own lawyer. This luminary, this new Demosthenes, would rise, would describe one by one the troubled figures involved in this trial, would paint his own dark picture of the environment and the people in Michele's family: his mother, a shameless slut; Leo, an incestuous confidence man; Lisa, a loose-living gossip; and he and Carla, both victims, children of an alcoholic father (the father's always alcoholic, he thought) growing up without parental love, without religion, without morals of any kind.

"Lover, first of Lisa, then of the mother," the lawyer would shout, "Leo then makes love to the daughter, *to the daughter,*

members of the jury," he would repeat in a voice full of pathos and pity, "whom he had known as an innocent child, with bare legs and braids on her shoulders, whom he had dandled on his knees, whom he had raised, you might say, for himself and his impure desires. . . . That house was his harem! And as if this weren't enough to satisfy his greed, he reached out to rob the family of their inheritance, of their house and estate. . . ." And having stacked up Leo's abuses like the stones of some evil edifice, the orator would praise, in generous, ringing tones, the justice inherent in the crime. Already Michele seemed to see him, his own Cicero, red and congested, his hair flying in the wind, his fists on the table. He seemed to hear him: "Will you condemn Michele for having vindicated the outraged and trampled-upon honor of *his own family?*" Raising his eyes, he realized he was on the street where Leo lived.

His blood froze. "Here I am," he thought, "here I am." The street was the one he had been looking for, there was no doubt about it: new white houses, unplanted gardens, here and there ongoing constructions loaded with scaffolding, unpaved sidewalks. The countryside couldn't be very far away. People passed but no one turned to look at him, no one noticed him at all. "And yet I'm on my way to kill a man," he thought. Incredible words. He slipped his hand into his pocket and touched the gun; killing Leo meant *really* killing him, subtracting him from the sum of the living, spilling his blood. "I *have* to kill him," he thought feverishly, "kill him . . . like that . . . without too much noise . . . like that . . . all right, I aim at his heart . . . he falls down . . . he falls to the ground . . . I bend over and slowly . . . without making any noise . . . I finish him off." The scene that should be lightning-swift appeared to him instead as incredibly long, its actions disjointed, surrounded by silence; he was overcome by a deathly malaise. "The thing to do would be to kill him without being aware of it," he thought. "Then it would all work out."

The sky was gray and few people were about. A car; villas; gardens; the gun in the bottom of his pocket; the trigger; the butt. He stopped for a moment to look at the number on a big front door,

and his own serenity scared him. "If I continue to feel this calm," he thought in terror, "I won't do anything . . . I have to be indignant, *furious*. . . ." He started walking again; number eighty-three was farther on. "I have to get worked up," he thought feverishly. "Let's see . . . I'd better think about the reasons I have for hating Leo. My mother, my sister . . . it was just a few days ago . . . and now in that same bed, naked and lost . . . Leo has *taken* her . . . *possessed* her . . . my sister . . . possessed . . . my sister . . . possessed . . . my sister . . . my sister . . . treated her like a whore . . . lying in that filthy bed, horrible . . . horrible, horrible . . . naked in his arms . . . my soul trembles at the very thought . . . bent to that man's vicious will . . . my sister . . . horrible." He ran a hand over his neck; his throat felt dry. "To hell with my sister," he thought desperately, finding himself as calm as before; his fantasies had failed to move him. Glancing at another front door, he saw that he was already at number sixty-five and was seized by an atrocious fear of being unable to act. He slid his hand back into his pocket and gripped the gun nervously. "To hell with everyone," he thought. "What do reasons matter, anyway. . . . I've decided to kill him and I'll kill him." He picked up his pace and the houses glided past him, one after the other, faster and faster . . . he needed to kill him and he *would* kill him, and that was all there was to it . . . number seventy-five, seventy-six, a street, step off the curb, seventy-seven, seventy-eight. Suddenly he began to run, the gun bouncing against his thigh. He saw a little girl of about ten on the sidewalk, holding the hand of an even younger boy; they were walking his way and he thought they'd cross paths, but before he reached them he was at Leo's door. He went in, regretting that he had not at least brushed against them lightly as they passed. "And now," he thought, rushing up the stairs, "it would be perfect not to find him at home." He took two flights at a run, and on the second landing, to the right, he found his enemy's door; on a brass plaque was written CAV. LEO MERUMECI.

He didn't ring the doorbell, since he was panting and didn't want to go in until he had caught his breath; he waited, standing straight and still in front of the closed door, for his breathing and

heartbeat to slow down, but they didn't. His heart throbbed and leapt chaotically in his breast, and his lungs swelled against his will with painful breaths. "O heart, O lungs," he thought, with a sad and nervous scorn, "are even you setting yourselves against me?" Pressing a hand to his side, he tried to gain control of himself; how long would it take for his body to be as ready as his soul? He counted from one to sixty, ridiculously, standing still against the silent door, then started over . . . until finally, he couldn't take it anymore. He interrupted himself and rang the bell.

He heard it echoing in the empty apartment; silence and immobility. "He's not at home!" he thought, with deep relief and joy. "I'll ring one more time just to make sure, and then I can go," and already, as he pressed the bell again, he was imagining himself descending back into the street, walking freely through the city, distracting himself; he was already forgetting his plans for revenge when he heard heavy steps crossing the floor on the other side of the door. Then it opened and Leo appeared.

He was wearing a bathrobe; his hair was mussed and his chest was bare. He looked the boy up and down.

"You here," he exclaimed, his face and voice drowsy, without inviting him in. "What do you want?"

They stared at each other. "What do I want?" Michele wanted to yell. "You know very well, you brazen bastard, what I want!" But he held back. "Nothing," he puffed out, his breath failing him again, "just to talk to you."

Leo raised his eyes, and a stupid, impudent expression crossed his face. "Oh, wonderful! You want to talk to me? To me? At this hour?" he said in exaggerated surprise, never moving from the threshold. "And what is it you want to tell me? Listen, listen, my dear," he added, beginning to shut the door, "wouldn't it be better some other day? I was sleeping, my head's not clear enough . . . how about tomorrow."

The door was closing. "It's not true that you were sleeping," thought Michele, and he was suddenly struck by this idea: "Carla's in there . . . in his bedroom." He seemed to see her, naked, sitting on the edge of the bed listening anxiously to the di-

alogue between her lover and his unknown visitor; he pushed on the door and went in.

"No," he said in a firm, troubled voice. "No, I have to talk to you today . . . right now."

Leo hesitated and then said, "So be it," in the tone of someone reaching the end of his patience.

Michele stepped forward. "Is Carla in there?" he wondered, and an extraordinary turmoil came over him. "Tell me the truth," he said finally with an effort, putting a hand on Leo's shoulder as the man shut the door, "tell me the truth, I've disturbed some sweet little get-together, haven't I? There's someone in there, isn't there? Hah, hah! Some beautiful girl. . . ."

He saw the man turn and sneer with a hateful smile of ill-concealed vanity as he replied, "Absolutely no one . . . I was asleep." Michele understood that he had hit the nail on the head. He put his hand in his pocket and gripped the gun. "Yes, I was sleeping," repeated Leo without turning around, preceding the boy into the anteroom, "I was fast asleep and having beautiful dreams."

"Ah! Really?"

"Yes . . . and you came and woke me up."

"No, I can't shoot him in the back, no," thought Michele, as he drew the gun out of his pocket and, keeping his hand against his hip, pointed it toward Leo; as soon as the man turned around, he would shoot him.

Leo went into the living room first, walked over to the table, and lit a cigarette. Wrapped in his robe like a wrestler, standing straddle-legged with his coarse face and tousled head bent toward the invisible match, he gave the impression of a man sure of himself and his life. Then he turned. And Michele, without any hatred, lifted his hand and shot.

There was no smoke and no noise. At the sight of the gun, Leo, terrified, had thrown himself with a sort of bellow behind a chair; then they both heard the dry click of the trigger. "It's jammed," thought the boy. He heard Leo shout, "You're crazy!" and lift a chair up in the air, exposing his whole body; then Michele leaned

forward and shot at him again — another click from the trigger. "It's not loaded," Michele realized at last, to his terror, "the bullets are still in my pocket."

He leapt to one side to avoid Leo's chair and ran to the opposite corner; his head was spinning, his throat was dry, his heart was beating like mad. "A bullet," he thought desperately, "just one bullet." He rummaged in his pocket and snatched up a few with feverish fingers, then raised his head and tried with crazed hands to open the cylinder and shove in the bullets. But Leo had seen his gesture and gave him such a blow on the hands and knees, wielding the chair from the side, that the gun fell to the floor and Michele closed his eyes from the pain. Seized by an unutterable rage, he hurled himself onto Leo, trying to get his hands around the man's neck; but he was caught, swung first to the right and then to the left, and then finally flung away with such violence that after landing blindly against a chair and overturning it, he ended up on the couch. Leo leapt on him like a flash and grabbed him by the wrists.

They stared at each other in silence. Flushed and panting, forced uncomfortably back into the couch, Michele made an effort to free himself, but Leo responded by twisting his wrists. Another effort, another twist . . . and finally Michele was vanquished by sorrow and anger. He felt dimly that life had never before been as bitter as it was at this moment, in which, brutally oppressed, he was suddenly filled with a painful yearning for certain long-forgotten maternal caresses, whose memory only now returned to torment him. Tears welled up in his eyes; he relaxed his aching muscles and abandoned himself to his fate. For an instant the man only stared at him, his bathrobe open and his hairy bare chest heaving with deep breaths that blew out through his quivering nostrils at intervals like the snorts of a savage beast. He stared and stared at Michele, and his whole body expressed a menacing fury barely held in check.

"You're crazy!" he shouted at last, shaking his head, and he let the boy go.

Michele stood up, rubbing his sore wrists. He saw Leo,

standing still and erect in the middle of the room; the overturned chair; and there, in the corner, that black thing, the gun. So it was really all over, it was really all done with . . . but he couldn't seem to understand it. . . . He didn't know if he should still act indignant or simply afraid. He looked at Leo and kept rubbing his wrists.

"And now," said the man at last, turning toward the door, "will you do me a godamn favor and get out of here." He wanted to strike the boy but restrained himself. "And as for this idiocy of yours," he added, "I'll bring it up with your mother."

But Michele didn't move. "He's not yelling at me, he's not *doing* anything to me, he wants me to get out of here in a hurry," he thought, "because he's afraid I'll discover Carla. Carla's in there . . . right in the next room." He looked at the second door and was almost surprised to see it so ordinary, so like all the others, amazed that it did not reveal his sister's presence in some way . . . by the hem of a dress, for instance, caught in the crack as she had rushed to slam it shut.

"Where is Carla?" he asked at last in a clear voice. A very slight surprise flickered in the man's impudent eyes and was swiftly gone.

"Carla?" he repeated, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "How should I know? She's probably at home or out for a walk." He stepped up to Michele and grabbed him by the arm. "Are you going to go now or not?"

"Ssst," hissed the boy, turning pale and looking at him without trying to free himself, "don't think you can scare me. I'll go when I want to."

"Are you going to go now or not?" repeated Leo more loudly, trying to drag Michele to the door.

But Michele resisted. "I think," he shouted quickly, digging in his heels, "that Carla's right there, in your bedroom!" The man shoved him backward. "And you, let me go!" yelled the boy, struggling; but Leo didn't loosen his grip.

"You *will* go," he insisted, almost happily. "I do as I like in my own home. And you'll get out of here now, not another word from

you." He shoved him again in the back, so that Michele couldn't turn around.

"Oh, you bastard!" the boy shouted, feeling his feet go out from under him. "You son of a bitch!"

"I may be a bastard," said Leo, giving him another push, "but you're leaving."

It was at that moment that the bedroom door opened and Carla came in.

She wasn't wearing a jacket, only a short, tight skirt and a brown wool sweater; she must have just gotten dressed, in a great hurry. Her hair was tousled and wild and her face pale, tired, and unadorned. She closed the door behind her. Holding herself very erect and staring fixedly before her, she stepped into the middle of the room.

"I heard some noise," she said, "so I came out."

"*What!*" After an initial instant of astonishment, Leo let go of Michele, ran over to her, and began shaking her by one arm. "*What?* I tell you to stay in there! and you come out anyway! What the hell? Who do you take me for? You're all crazy! I can't believe it!" For a moment, fury rendered him speechless; then he appeared to have mastered himself. "All right, since you wanted so badly to come out," he added, "there you go, there's your brother Michele, who shoots guns at people! So *you* talk to him, do what you want about it, I wash my hands of it!" He let go of her arm and went to sit near the window like someone who does not wish to be disturbed.

Michele looked at Carla; where was the virtuous indignation he had imagined he would feel at this moment? Somewhere else. He wouldn't even have been able to sustain the idea of seduction if Leo hadn't grabbed the girl by the arm in such a brutal way, and if a certain negligence hadn't revealed the haste with which she had dressed. "God only knows how she was when I came in," he thought, as he searched, sadly and avidly, for traces of her guilt. Her wan face, the dark circles around her violated eyes, her lips paled by use, her confused and sated expression, all confirmed his suspicions; but her body — that body that had been entered,

burned, and bent in a thousand ways to Leo's lust — her body revealed nothing; it was just like it was every day. Only the top of her breasts gave him the strange impression that it was no longer that innocent thing he had always considered detached, separate from her other, hidden parts, but the impure edge from which one could guess at the whole naked body.

"My congratulations," he said at last, with an effort, "but it wasn't necessary to go out of your way to get dressed . . . you could have come out like Leo, in a bathrobe." He pointed at the man, who made an irritable gesture and covered his chest.

Silence.

"Michele, don't talk like that," she pleaded anxiously at last. "Let me explain it to you. . . ."

"There's nothing to explain." Michele went over to the table and leaned up against it. "I don't know if you love him," he went on as if the man weren't in the room, beside the window, "but one thing's for sure, you've hurt yourself enormously. You *know* what he means to Mamma and what kind of man he is, and still you went ahead and made love to him . . . and what's worse, I'm sure you don't love him. . . ."

"No, I don't love him," she admitted, without raising her eyes, "but there's another reason. . . ."

"Ah! There's another reason!" repeated Leo under his breath. He was watching them both, brother and sister, with a kind of amused disdain; by now his anger had cooled and there was nothing left to do but wait to see what happened. "I could tell you the reason," he thought, recalling the lewd position he had seen Carla in no more than ten minutes before. "Lust, my dear, the *need* you had. . . ."

"Not even you know why you did this," Michele went on; caught up in his fervor, he felt he could read his sister's guilt like an open book. "Not even you could explain it."

"I *do* know," she protested, raising her eyes.

"Then tell me."

Carla cast a troubled look at Michele and then at Leo. "To have a new life," she wanted to answer, but her courage failed her.

Now that she saw that nothing had changed except in her deflowered body, that first distant reason of hers seemed ridiculous and unworthy; and a shame, a fear of not being believed or of being derided kept her from revealing it. She lowered her head and said nothing.

"Then *I'll* tell *you* why," continued Michele triumphantly, although inwardly he was terribly irritated by the role it was his lot to play ("What am I?" he thought. "Some kind of paterfamilias?"), "you had a moment of weakness, of boredom, and you didn't want to look any farther than Leo, you accepted him right away, just like you would have accepted any other man if one had come forward . . . and you yielded to him without knowing why, maybe just to do *something*."

"Yes . . . to do *something*," she echoed.

"So, she calls what she's done *something*," thought Leo ironically. He felt no pity for those two. It seemed absurd to him more than anything, absurd and ridiculous that Michele, that stupid boy who had tried to shoot him but had forgotten to load his gun, and Carla, that little tart he had held naked in his arms in his bed only minutes before, and to whom he had done everything he had wanted to do, should now both be climbing up on the judge's throne, sprouting angels' wings and the halos of saints, pretending they were pure and leaving him down in the filth and the mud. "Just do me a goddamn favor," he felt like shouting, "and drop the prissy faces and serious discussions, will you . . . call the bread, bread, and the wine, wine. You are what you are and nothing more." But he restrained himself, curious to see how the fraternal scene would play out.

"And then you realized you hadn't done anything," continued Michele, "that you had left one impossible situation behind only to seek out another, no less boring and sad. That's how it went. . . ." He fell silent, looking at Carla.

And seeing her standing there in front of him, upright, stubborn, and silent, not like someone who is guilty but simply like someone who is listening respectfully, even submissively, but certainly indifferently, to some random reproof, and feeling himself,

simultaneously, so far from the truth and so wrapped up in the lies forced upon him by the inertia of his own spirit, he was seized by black anguish, invaded by humiliated pain. "There is nothing but darkness," he thought, "nothing exists except darkness." He lowered his eyes.

"Now we have to start all over again," he added in a low, uncertain voice. "Our mistakes have been inspired by boredom and our impatience to live. You don't love this man, and I don't hate him . . . and yet we've both made him the center of what we're trying to do." His heart trembled; he was so weighed down by powerlessness and distress that he wanted to scream. "Everything has to start over," he repeated bitterly. "It will be a new life."

"A new life?" Discouraged, Carla walked to the window; the first drops of rain were streaking the dusty glass; for a moment she gazed at them as if in a dream. A new life? Then it was true that nothing had changed? And her filthy little affair was really just a filthy little affair and nothing more? She thought she would suffocate.

"No," she said in a clear voice, without turning around. "I don't believe that a new life is possible. I went with him," and she pointed awkwardly at her motionless lover sitting in his chair, "I did this thing, understand? for this 'new life.' And now instead I realize that nothing has changed . . . so it's better not to keep trying . . . it's better just to stay the way we are."

"No, don't say that, no," began Michele in an indifferent voice; now, forced to come down from his own hard-won emotional peak to his sister's particular case, he became fearfully aware that what little faith he had worked up was evaporating. "No, that's not it . . . nothing has changed *because you don't love Leo.* It was a useless mistake . . . what we have to do, to live and to change, is to act sincerely. . . ." It suddenly seemed extraordinary and stupid to him that everyone else's situation appeared to converge with his own, the way certain people, when they are sick, attribute their own illness to everyone else; he was afraid of being egotistical, of seeing only himself, of not understanding Carla. "At least I think that's how it is," he added, discouraged, "and I think

you should separate from this man you don't love. We'll sell the house, we'll pay him off, and if there's something left for us, so much the better. . . . We'll leave behind all these parties, these people, this environment, all this stuff that's boring us to death. . . . We'll go live in an apartment, a few rooms. . . . It will really be a new life." But he knew he was lacking the necessary warmth, the firm voice, the hand on the shoulder, the secure and reassuring tone; he felt indifferent and weary.

Carla looked away from those eyes devoid of faith or illusion and fixed her own on the window. "It's impossible," she said at last, as if she were talking to herself.

There was a silence.

The boy's speech had turned Leo to ice, right in the middle of his hot and bitter irony. "Sell the house . . . he's mad," he thought. God, if they sold the house, the whole deal would go up in smoke; to sell it they'd have to have it appraised, and then the true value of the house would come out — that ample *villa*, situated right in the center of the best quarter of the city, surrounded by that vast park, which could so advantageously be broken up and sold as separate lots, ready for new construction. . . . God, if they sold it, the whole thing would fall through! He looked at Carla and Michele aghast. "What new life," he thought, "they're going to ruin me." Suddenly an idea came to him, and, like some unspeakably desperate beggar, he decided to act on it immediately.

"Just a minute!" he yelled. "Just a minute . . . I'm in this, too!" He stood up, shoved Michele aside, and taking his lover by the arm, pushed her down in the chair. "Sit here." The girl obeyed him with a docility that Michele found horrifying. "She'll never make anything of herself," he thought in despair. Leo sat down in his turn, facing Carla.

"It's true," he began, in the same precise, resolute manner with which he conducted all his business, "it's true that we've done something wrong . . . that we've made some mistakes. I've been thinking about it while you two were talking, I've been thinking about it, Carla. So, what would you say if I proposed reparation . . . if I proposed marriage?" A persuasive, triumphant smile

curved his fleshy lips; he was sure he could convince her. "What would you say, eh?" he repeated, taking one of her hands where it lay on the table.

The hand attempted to free itself but did not succeed. "Marriage?" she repeated, with a disappointed smile. "You're talking about getting married, you and me?"

"Yes," insisted Leo, "getting married. You and me. What would be so strange about that?"

The girl shook her head. She was repulsed by the idea of marriage to Leo, with her mother in the house, in love with her husband and jealous; besides, it was too late, she wasn't sure why, too late to get married; they knew each other too well by now to be husband and wife. It would be better to go away, to separate, or, who knows? even remain as they were . . . lovers. In her initial impulse of disgust, in her first instinctive movement of defense against that pure and distant idea of marriage, the most vile and painful situations seemed preferable to marrying Leo. This is what she was thinking without knowing how to say it; she was looking at her lover as if fascinated by his smile and his glance. Then she felt two hands, Michele's hands, come to rest on her shoulders. "No," he murmured in her ear, his voice low but not so low that Leo couldn't hear it, "tell him no."

Leo dropped Carla's hand and stood up. "Do you want to do me a favor and leave your sister in peace for just one damn minute?" he shouted, greatly annoyed. "She's the one who's getting married, not you! Let her think . . . let her answer for herself. . . . In fact, I think it would be better if you went over there for a minute and left us alone, me and Carla. We'll call you back when we're done."

"Calm down. I'm staying here," answered Michele in a challenging tone.

Leo made an impatient gesture but didn't directly respond. Instead, he took Carla's hand in his own again and sat down. "So," he said, looking at her, "think about it. Think about it . . . I'm not such a bad match. I have money, a solid position, I'm well known and respected . . . think about it." He stopped for a second, then

added, "Besides, how else are you going to find a husband in your circumstances?"

"What do you mean, 'in your circumstances'?"

"You know," said Leo. His mouth twisted. "You don't have a cent. Plus . . . do I have to say it? you're pretty highly compromised."

"What do you mean, compromised?" she interrupted again in a faint voice.

"*Compromised,*" Leo repeated. "All these friends of yours . . . they don't think of you as a serious girl. Do I have to explain? They'd take advantage of you but they wouldn't marry you. They're all very well for having fun with. . . ."

They stared at each other in silence. "It's *your* fault, yours and Mamma's, that I'm in this situation," she wanted to shout; but she restrained herself and lowered her head.

"While I," continued Leo, "would straighten out everything. Not just you but your family, too. Your mother would live with us . . . Michele would get a job . . . I might even offer him something myself, find him a placement." With each new promise he looked at Carla attentively, the way a woodcutter observes the hewed trunk of a tree at every blow of his ax to see if it's ready to fall. But Carla only gazed at the window, against which the rain was beating in violent silence as if it were weeping, and did not respond.

A damp, cavernous shadow had invaded the room, and in this shadow Michele was pacing up and down. "To get a placement . . . a job," he was thinking over and over, greatly disturbed; there was no doubt that Leo was speaking in earnest, and would do in fact what he was promising now, find a way for Michele to make money. To his own vague concept of sincerity the man was opposing solid promises — what should he choose? The temptation was strong: money, acquaintances, women, maybe even business trips, maybe even wealth . . . or at any rate, a secure, clear, direct life full of satisfactions, work, holidays, cordial conversations. Carla's marriage could give him all this . . . and he wouldn't be *selling* his sister, he didn't believe in those great and terrible

words, didn't believe in honor and duty. . . . He felt indifferent, as always, speculative and indifferent. "I won't say anything to her," he thought at last, almost against his will. "I'll let her decide. If she accepts, all right . . . if she refuses, all right too." But a slight disquiet warned him of the ignobility of his thoughts; he raised his eyes and looked toward the window.

In its uncertain light, their two heads were clearly defined, black against the gray panes; it must be going to rain. He started pacing again, stopping to look at them every once in a while — where had he seen those two figures against that window before? Each time he observed them, a nervous sadness swept through him.

"So," he thought, "so . . . I pace up and down in this darkness. They sit over there near the window, and I pace up and down . . . they talk . . . and we're so separate, so distant . . . why are we this way? It's as if we were all alone, it's as if we didn't see each other." His eyes filled with tears; where had he seen them before?

Leo was talking. "If you're hesitating because of your mother, set your heart at rest. I assure you that everything's been over between her and me for quite a while."

There was a silence; then Carla shook her head. "No, it's not because of my mother," she answered. "That's not the reason."

"Maybe because of Lisa," Leo suggested.

"Oh! No!"

"Oh! What, then?" he cried. "Why would you refuse? I don't see why you would refuse. It surely can't be . . . ," he added with a smile, squeezing the girl's hand, "for sentimental reasons."

She looked at him. Her first impulse to reject him had been followed by a sort of sad clairvoyance. "It's true, why should I refuse him my hand when I've let him have all the rest of me?" There was a new hardness in her soul; Leo's promises didn't convince her, oh no. "We don't love each other," she thought. "It will be an unhappy marriage." But Michele's seemed downright childish to her. "Life doesn't change," she thought again, "it will never change. Leo's right . . . we should marry each other." And she was about to surrender, to say *yes* with a shamed, humiliated

smile; she was already imagining how her future husband would put his arms around her waist and kiss her on the forehead; in other words, she was already imagining a touching scene, when Michele's voice rose up from the end of the room:

"For the love of God, Carla, for the love of God, tell him *no*."

They turned; standing in the middle of the room, Michele seemed almost ashamed of his emotional plea. Leo got up and brought down his fist on the table.

"Will you give it up!" he shouted. "Just once will you quit sticking your nose into things that haven't got a damn thing to do with you?"

Michele took a step forward. "She's my sister," he said.

"She's your sister," Leo repeated. "So what? Maybe you think she's not free to choose the husband she wants on her own?" He sat back down. "Listen to me, Carla," he insisted, "pay no attention to your brother's advice. He doesn't know what he's talking about."

But the girl gestured for him to be quiet. "Why?" she asked, turning toward the boy. "Why should I say *no*?"

She saw him hesitate. "You don't love him . . ." he began.

"That's not a reason. You can survive without love."

"There's our mother. . . ."

"Oh! her," said Carla, shrugging her shoulders. "She's no problem."

Silence.

"Carla," insisted Michele after a moment, "you should refuse him if only because I'm asking you to. . . . If you married Leo, then . . . it would be such a waste. . . ." His voice trembled.

"Certainly," she thought, observing her brother, "it wouldn't be great." But after the drunken delirium of her "new life," she felt possessed by a sad, even gloomy need for reality. "And what would I get," she asked in a bitter voice, "in exchange?"

"What would you get?" He looked at Carla; her eyes were calm and empty, her cheeks dark; a lazy mass of coarse hair surrounded her face. "What would you get? You'd be free . . . free to make a new life for yourself."

Silence.

"Don't think what I'm saying's not true," he added, struck by the vacuity of his own words, "in a way I'm in the same situation you're in . . . and I know there are a lot of obstacles and difficulties. But in the end we'll reach our . . . we'll reach our *life*." He watched as Carla shook her head without moving her eyes from the window. "Have faith!" he wanted to shout at her.

Leo smiled confidently. "Words," he said. "Life isn't new or old, it's what it is."

Finally Carla gave herself a shake and turned toward her lover. "So, Leo," she asked, with forced coquetry, "you want us to get married?"

"Absolutely," he answered vehemently.

"And you're not afraid it will turn sour?" she insisted. "For instance," she added placidly, "I'm quite sure that you'll betray me."

"It's *you* that will betray *me*, my little slut," thought Leo, staring at her flushed face devoured by the shadows. He felt like giving her a slap, right there on her large breasts, just an easy-going, good-natured, cheerfully contemptuous slap, since every so often he would see her in his mind's eye as she had been only minutes before, naked and white, moving like a clumsy animal because of her inexperience. "I'm marrying a tart," he thought again, and held out his hand.

"I swear to you," he said solemnly, "that I will always be faithful to you."

"Carla," insisted Michele, "tell him no." He went over to her and put a hand on her shoulder. "Tell him *no*. The reason is . . . you'll find out the reason afterward."

Carla looked out the window and said nothing; her big round head looked disproportionate, set above her slender shoulders. It was night now, and a last faint light, a sort of uncertain phosphorescence, was withdrawing from the wet glass of the windows. It was still raining. The darkness in the house had fallen on all of them; they could see only each other's hollow faces, devoured by shadow, and their hands lying on the table.

"It's time to go," Carla said finally, rising to her feet.

"And the answer?" asked Leo, getting up in turn and feeling his way along the wall to turn on the light. In the sudden brightness they looked at each other for an instant with dazzled eyes, as if astonished to see each other, Carla and Michele standing beside each other near the window, and Leo near the door. Then, for the first time, the man noticed a certain resemblance between the brother and sister: the same indecisive expression, the same timid posture of the arms. But Carla's face was only weary (right now she was brushing a hand over her violated eyes), while Michele's expressed a partly nervous, partly theatrical melancholy. They stood one beside the other in front of the window and appeared to be afraid of him.

"The answer?" echoed the girl after a moment. "Tomorrow, Leo . . . tomorrow . . . I have to talk to Mamma." She turned toward her brother and laid a hand against his chest. "Michele, wait for me here," she added, looking at him attentively, "I'm going to go put on my hat and then I'm coming with you." She walked between him and the table with a careless, nonchalant grace, passed in front of her lover, and opened the door to the right without closing it behind her. Michele saw the room light up and then he saw a wardrobe with a mirror, a rug, and a chair onto which a man's shirt had been flung with its sleeve hanging down. In front of the mirror he could see Carla coming and going: first, like a person at home in the place, she switched on the lamp on the wardrobe and combed her hair efficiently; then she went out; then she returned with her jacket and her little hat and put them both on somewhat flirtatiously; then she disappeared again, returned with her purse, and powdered her face. During these preparations, neither of the men moved or spoke. Leo stayed where he was near the door, dressed in his bathrobe, cinched tight at the waist and cut full, pleated, and short over his broad legs and bare chest. His eyes and head were lowered as if he were meditating deeply, and the fine, ruffled hair above his bald forehead looked like a little gray cloud. He had joined his hands behind his back, and every once in a while, without raising his head, he rolled up onto his toes, then fell heavily back onto his heels.

Michele didn't move from the window, where he stood observing his sister's familiar, frivolous movements in front of the mirror with dazed eyes. It seemed to him that a heavy, corrupt atmosphere filled that next room; he could imagine the *impurity* of its disorder — the tangled sheets, the clothes thrown over the chairs, the pillows on the floor, the odors of perfume, tobacco, and sleep. And yet Carla was moving freely, almost gaily, on her graceful legs in that atmosphere and disorder, although she looked disheveled, tired, and pale. . . . But now here she was, ready to go, with her little hat tipped rakishly over her eyes, her powdered face looking fresh and rosy again, bright lipstick on her lips and a sharp little curl on either cheek; here she was, walking away from that tarnished mirror, that turbid air, that wall, that chair . . . walking toward him.

"Let's go," she said calmly, and she held her hand out to Leo. "Good-bye, Leo."

"So it's *yes*, isn't it?" the man murmured, kissing the tips of her fingers, feeling confident and happy. Carla looked at him without responding, and all three of them walked out into the vestibule, first the girl and then the two men. Satisfied, almost excited, Leo circled his lover, murmuring, "We'll get married . . . we'll get married," while Michele was slipping on his overcoat in the opposite corner. The man wished she would smile, or at least concede him a glance, some sign that would reveal the possibility of acceptance; but Carla was inflexible and distracted, as if she had neither heard him nor seen him. "Good-bye, Leo," she repeated as she left.

For a while, through the crack in the half-closed door, he watched the two of them descend the stairs without speaking, without looking back, followed on the wall by two vague, oblique shadows; finally he shut the door and went back into the living room. He caught sight of Michele's gun on the floor and picked it up, weighing it in his hand and looking at it distractedly. He recalled that he had been invited to the dance at the Grand Hotel and that Mariagrazia had decided to go, too. "It will be a perfect occasion to reinforce the idea of marriage in Carla's mind," he

thought, and, completely satisfied, he went into the bedroom and stepped in front of the mirror. He looked at himself.

"Good going!" he said out loud; he felt like patting himself on the back. "Even married, you'll always be the same old Leo."

He walked into the bathroom and began to wash.

16

When they reached the front door of the building and stood on the threshold, they realized that it was raining very hard. It was not a violent rain but a sloppy downpour, as if it were spilling out of a leaky basin, and the air was filled with a great, torrential sound of rushing waters. A blue-black film was seething on the pavement of the street; and in spouts, drips, and rivulets the heavy weight of the rain, held back for two weeks, now gushed and spurted its polluted waters long fermented in the loins of the clouds. The houses stood straight and black beneath the deluge; the streetlamps were drowning; the inundated sidewalks had taken on the amphibious character of the half-submerged docks of seaports.

Bent over beneath the deluge, they walked hurriedly alongside the walls, struggling to shelter themselves under the single umbrella they held between them. At a curve in the road they were assaulted by the harsh beams of an empty taxicab's headlights; they hailed it and climbed in.

They sat side by side in the darkness without looking at each other, without speaking, and at every jolt they bounced and

bumped against each other like two lifeless mannequins with wooden limbs and wide-open, ecstatic eyes. Michele was almost lying down, leaning against the back and seeming to meditate; Carla was sitting a little hunched over, trying to follow their route and not succeeding. The glass of the windows was wet and misted by cold vapor; impossible to see anything. She felt as though she were closed off from the world, alone with her brother in that dark box, being borne at great velocity toward an unknown destination. Where? This was how the day and her old life were ending, with a question to which there was no answer: where is one ever *going*, whether it's day or night, whether it's raining and dark or the sun is shining? No one knows. She was terrified. She wanted to shrink her goals, diminish her world, view her entire existence as a narrow room. "I'll marry Leo," she thought. She stared at the glass of the window beside her with weary eyes and seemed to see small, luminous figures emerge and define themselves on its dark, gleaming surface. Ah, the windowpanes of houses on rainy nights; the glass of train windows, talkative and monotonous, flashing mysteriously; windows that opened onto the black landscape of dreams. *Ecco*. . . .

Ecco . . . the steps of a church were emerging out of the darkness. She saw herself, dressed all in white in her long bride's veils, her face slightly lowered (it must be a sunny day), holding onto the arm of her companion; and following them, casting off the darkness one by one, the members of the bridal procession. Her mother, a considerable distance away, was surely crying, but Carla could see only that she was holding a brightly colored, round bouquet of flowers in her hands; Michele was walking with his head down as if he were looking at where he was putting his feet; Lisa was wearing an extraordinary spring dress. There were many other guests whose faces she couldn't distinguish, the women dressed in white and the men in black, scattered and crowded behind them. Some were still half in shadow, others in full light; they were all very elegant. She could make out the impeccable creases of the men's trousers and see that each man was gripping a shiny top hat full of reflections in his hands; she could

distinguish the round, colored bouquets of the women flower by flower. They were all coming out of the church's invisible portals and descending the sun-washed steps behind the bride and groom. Suddenly a slow, religious music sounded forth, seeming to follow the wedding procession step by step: organ or bells? She seemed to hear them, those triumphal sounds accompanying her, and although they were solemn, they were filled with a bitter and exultant sorrow as if she, dressed as she was and holding the arm of her husband, were not moving toward joy but instead toward a thankless sacrifice and a life full of distress and insuperable difficulties.

She shook herself. A hand, Michele's hand, was squeezing her own; the shadow on the glass spread swiftly across the luminous figures of the wedding procession like a roll of film exposed and burned by the sun. The cab had slowed down to a halt and was waiting, motionless, to cross a crowded street. Rain and the sound of rain; bells; horns; voices; lights; faces; at last the car started back up with a jolt and moved on.

"Well," she asked, turning around, "what is it?"

She saw her brother make a clumsy, convulsive gesture with his hand. "If I'm not mistaken," he said with an effort, "if I'm not mistaken, I didn't tell you the reason you should refuse Leo."

She looked at him. "No."

"This is it." The boy leaned forward and began to talk to her hurriedly, without transition. "This is the reason. Today, before I went to see Lisa . . . by the way, she was the one who told me everything, about you and Leo. . . ."

"Ah! It was her."

"Yes, it seems that she saw the two of you last night in the anteroom . . . but anyway, as I was saying . . . yesterday, before I went to see Lisa, I'm not sure how, but I began thinking about our financial situation, about our circumstances, which, to tell the truth, are really very bad . . . and slowly but surely I got so wrapped up in my reasoning that I lost, how can I say this? I lost all restraint, and surprised myself thinking, more or less: 'Here we are, ruined beyond any hope of remedy; within a year, if things go on like this,

we'll be faced with real poverty. Wouldn't it be advisable to make some kind of sacrifice or come to some sort of compromise in order to avoid disaster? And the only person we could possibly count on to come up with something like that is Leo.' So I thought — almost without being aware of what I was thinking — given the character of the man, that he's a womanizer and that he'd give everything he had to a woman who pleased him, wouldn't it be useful to make him understand that in exchange for his money I'd undertake — do you understand? — to bring him my sister, Carla, *you*, in other words, to bring her, you, to his place?"

"You thought that?" she asked, turning swiftly to look at him. Right then a streetlamp illuminated Michele's face for an instant; she saw his open, dilated eyes, his white face nodding *yes*, his repugnant, awkward humility, and she turned her head away. A fist of agonized sorrow clenched at her trembling heart. The taxi rolled on.

Michele was speaking again. "I thought about this . . . and I seemed to *see* it, you know?" He made a motion with his hand as if he were trying to grasp something. "I seemed to see how all three of us, you, me, and Leo, would go to his house . . . when I'm troubled I always seem to see the things I'm thinking about . . . and how we would have tea in Leo's living room, and how I would finally leave, discreetly, according to the agreement he and I had made, leaving you alone with Leo. . . ."

"That's horrible," she murmured, frightened, but Michele didn't hear her.

"But then . . . understand? when I saw the two of you just now facing each other in front of the living room window, and I heard Leo propose marriage to you . . . I seemed to be watching the very scene I had imagined. It happens to everyone . . . you're strolling along the street, thinking about finding people in a certain situation, and then, in fact, that's how you find them. . . . But in my case there was more to it, there was my calculation, my calculation about Leo's money. 'So,' I said to myself, 'everything has happened the way I imagined it, the way I *shouldn't* have imagined it, everything is just as if I had really said to Leo, "Listen, Leo . . .

there's my sister, Carla . . . she's a beautiful, big-breasted girl. . . .'" Don't be offended, Carla, but that's the way I had imagined speaking to him. . . ."

"I'm not offended," she murmured without turning to look at him. "Go on."

"'A beautiful, big-breasted girl,'" repeated Michele. "'You give me some money, a lot of money, and promise to support my family, and in exchange I'll . . . in exchange I'll give you a free hand with Carla . . . do what you want with her. . . .'"

"But what were you thinking . . . ," she interrupted, sad and irritated, "what were you thinking I was? An object? An animal?"

"No, but I knew," replied Michele, with a triumphant half-smile, "that you were bored and . . . how shall I put it? that you were in the right kind of situation to . . . that you would yield easily."

"You knew this?" she murmured.

"The fact that I hadn't actually done anything," Michele went on without responding, "no longer mattered at all. I would still suffer the same remorse . . . seeing you two married, living on that money, I would always suffer as if I'd been truly guilty . . . understand? Understand?" he repeated, seizing her by the arm in sudden exasperation. "Understand? You think about an evil, ugly act, but you don't do it . . . but then everything starts happening the way you had imagined it, but not completely, only up to a certain point . . . in such a way that you can still keep it from going any further. What are you supposed to do then? You try to oppose it, to stop this horrible thing from really happening . . . because if you don't, it's as if you'd been an accomplice from the beginning to the end, it's as if I had really offered you to Leo for his money and had really brought you to his house. Do you understand now? For me, if you marry him, it's as if I had really instigated your union, your guilt, it's as if I had thrust you into Leo's arms on the one hand and received money for it on the other . . . understand? Understand now?"

The cab jolted and threw them one against the other; both were repulsed. The car rolled on in silence.

"Do you forgive me?" asked the boy at last, in a moved and humble voice, leaning forward beside his sister. "Do you forgive me, Carla?"

She stared into the air and said nothing. Then she gave a dry, forced laugh. "There's nothing to forgive," she told him. "You didn't do anything to me. You haven't harmed me in any way. . . . What would I have to forgive you for?"

Silence.

"I don't have anything to forgive anyone for," she insisted in an exasperated, tearful voice, without moving her eyes from the car window, "not anyone . . . all I want is to be left in peace." Her eyes filled with tears. Everyone and no one was guilty, but she was tired of examining herself and the others. She didn't want to forgive; she didn't want to condemn; life was what it was and it was better to accept it than to judge it, if only they would leave her in peace.

But Michele felt he had found, in her words, his definitive condemnation. "I didn't *do* anything," he repeated to himself in astonishment, since he seemed to himself to have aged, to have lived through a great deal in that single day. "It's true . . . I haven't done a thing . . . nothing but *think*. . . ." A shiver of fear shook him. "I haven't made love to Lisa. I haven't killed Leo. I've only thought about these things . . . that's my mistake." He leaned forward and took one of his sister's hands in his own.

"You'll refuse him, won't you?" he asked anxiously. "Tell me you'll refuse him."

Silence.

"I'll marry him," she said at last.

Another silence.

"What would happen to me if I didn't marry him?" she continued, in a hard, sad voice. "What would I become? Think about it for a second . . . in these circumstances. . . ." She made a gesture as if to show him what she was: naked, lost, poor. "It would be madness to refuse him, there's nothing left for me to do but marry him. . . ." She fell silent, staring into space as she had before.

The rigidity of her tone persuaded Michele more than any

possible reasoning. "It's all over," he thought, gazing at Carla's childish cheeks, illuminated by the headlights. "She's a woman." He felt defeated.

"And so, Carla," he asked once more, like a child who is not quite convinced, "you'll marry him?"

"I'll marry him," she repeated without turning to look at him.

The cab had almost reached its destination. The streets grew broader and less populated. Now they were lined not with houses, but with bright villas and dark, rain-soaked gardens; there were very few streetlamps on the wide, deserted sidewalks. Carla was following their route attentively, and her thoughts were whirling at the same velocity in her exhausted and overexcited mind; that car was her life, launched blindly into the darkness.

She would marry Leo . . . they would live together, sleep together, eat together, go out together, share trips, sorrows, and joys. . . . They would have a lovely home, a beautiful apartment in an elegant quarter of the city. . . .

Now someone is walking into the luxurious, tastefully furnished living room; it's a signora, one of her married friends, and Carla goes to meet her; they have tea together and then go out; her car is waiting for her at the door. They climb in and go. . . . She, too, would be called signora, Signora Merumeci, how strange, Signora Merumeci. She seemed to see herself, a little bit taller and bigger, her legs larger, her hips broader — marriage fattens a woman — with jewels at her neck and on her fingers and wrists; she would be harder, colder, splendid but cold, as if she were keeping a secret behind her expressionless eyes and had killed all the feelings in her heart to preserve it.

Maintaining this attitude, elegantly dressed, she enters the crowded lobby of a hotel; following is her husband, Leo, a little balder, a little fatter, but not greatly changed. They sit down, they drink tea, they dance, and many people are watching her and thinking, "Beautiful, a beautiful woman but haughty . . . she never smiles . . . she has hard eyes . . . she seems like a statue . . . who knows what she's thinking about?" Others, standing by the columns at the end of the room, murmur to each other, "She

married her mother's lover . . . a man much older than she is . . . she doesn't love him, she must certainly have a lover." Everyone is murmuring and thinking about her, watching her as she sits next to her husband with her knees crossed, smoking a cigarette, showing off her legs; her dress is tight and short with a low-cut neckline, and people are observing her greedily, as if they wanted to take a bite of her. But her only response is to glance at them with indifference.

A bedroom . . . *ecco,* Signora Merumeci, late because of some social duty, runs to meet her lover. Her statuelike hardness melts in his arms — these rigid women are always the most ardent — and she becomes a girl again, laughing, crying, stammering like a freed prisoner finally seeing the light. Her joy is white, the whole room is white, she is without stain in the arms of her lover, her purity is restored. Then, when it's time, she goes home, returns to her married life tired and happy, and recomposes her face into its habitual chill. Her life goes on like this for years . . . so many people envy her . . . she's rich, she has fun, she goes on trips, she has a lover, what more could she want? Everything a woman can have, she has.

The car stopped and they got out. It was no longer raining and the air was cold and foggy; a damp wind was blowing the dark foliage of the gardens into incessant motion. Carla leapt agilely over the wide puddle gleaming between the street and the sidewalk and stood very straight under a streetlight, waiting for her brother to pay. Then she noticed a long, black shape parked by the curb like a whale left there by the flood: a big, shining automobile. Slumped down in his seat, a beret tipped over his eyes, its chauffeur was sleeping. "The Berardis' car," she thought in surprise, suddenly remembering their invitation to the masked ball.

"Michele," she said to her brother as he came toward her, carefully stepping over the puddles in the gutter, "the Berardis' car."

"Right," he observed, with a rapid glance at the car, "they must have come to get you."

They walked into the park and crossed it in silence, looking cautiously at where they were putting their feet. The crunch of

gravel underfoot; damp; dark, fantastic shapes against the foggy sky; vast, oceanic roar of tall trees; a sense of respite; an end to rain.

In the hot, bright vestibule Michele took off his hat and coat. "Carla," he finally said to his sister, who was waiting for him on the threshold, "when are you going to tell Mamma about this marriage?"

She looked at him. "Tomorrow," she said tranquilly.

They went into the hallway. The sound of voices and laughter reached them from the living room; the girl tiptoed up to the curtains that hid the door and pulled them aside to spy for a moment. "They're all there," she said, turning around, "all three of them, Pippo, Mary, and Fanny."

They went upstairs; and in the anteroom their mother and Lisa came to meet them. Their mother was already costumed as a Spanish lady: her soft, pathetic face was all smeared with an overabundance of makeup, her cheeks rouged and dotted with beauty marks, her lips vermilion, her eyes smothered in languid black liner. The long, entirely black Spanish costume swayed around her as she swung her hips, its many pleats soft and swirling; a sumptuous veil embroidered in overstitch fell from the broad tortoiseshell comb onto her fat shoulders and wide, nude, quivering arms; she was holding an ostrich-feather fan. She smiled stupidly, walking with her head held very straight and rigid, as if she were afraid to disturb the equilibrium of her headdress by moving. At her side, like day next to night, was Lisa, blond, white as flour, dressed in pastels.

As soon as she saw Carla and Michele, their mother rushed toward them. "It's late!" she cried, even before they had finished climbing the stairs. "The Berardis have been waiting for us for a quarter of an hour already."

She was satisfied and happy. Lisa had spent all afternoon with her, proof that her lover had told her the truth and was not betraying her. Her joy had made her affable in the extreme with her friend and she had confided many things to her; for an instant she had even thought of inviting her to the dance that night. But she

had renounced the idea, partly due to a stingy egotism, and partly because the Berardis hardly knew Lisa and might be insulted if Mariagrazia took the liberty of inviting her.

"Hurry up . . . hurry up," she kept saying to Carla, who was contemplating her without moving, "hurry, go get dressed in your costume!"

"Do I have to go in costume?" asked the girl in a low, hesitant voice, without lifting her eyes from the floor.

Her mother laughed. "Wake up, Carla," she said, fluttering under her undulant Spanish veil, "what are you thinking about? You don't want to go to the dance without wearing a costume?" She took her daughter by the arm. "Come on," she said, "come on, let's go . . . otherwise we'll be late."

With a mechanical gesture, Carla took off her hat and lazily shook out her great mass of tousled hair before following her mother. The Spanish veil parted elegantly, like waves, from the two tightly bound cheeks of the woman's buttocks; and as Carla gazed at them it seemed to her, seeing her mother so much *herself*, so unchanged and unchangeable, that nothing had really happened that afternoon. "And yet," she thought, "I'm going to have to tell her about this wedding." So, the one swept along in the wake of the other, they went out of the room.

Lisa and Michele were left alone. From the moment the brother and sister had arrived together, the woman had been watching them from her corner of the room with a greedy, troubled curiosity; now, after waiting in vain for the boy to speak first, she approached him.

"So," she asked, without bothering to hide her indiscreet interest, "tell me . . . how did it go?"

He turned and looked at her. "How did it go," he repeated slowly, "how did it go? It went badly. I shot at him."

"*Misericordia!*" cried Lisa in exaggerated terror, observing him closely. "Did you wound him?"

"Didn't even touch him."

"Come here!" Aroused, she pulled him down onto the couch and sat down beside him. "Sit here . . . tell me about it. . . ."

But Michele made a weary, impatient gesture. "Not now . . . later." He looked at her pink-and-blond flesh and ripe breasts and was seized by an overwhelming desire to forget his own misery, if only for a moment. "Are you going to the dance?" he asked at last, when he had finished examining her.

"No."

"Then," he hesitated, " since I'm not going either, I'll come to your place for supper, and that way . . . I can tell you everything."

She nodded enthusiastically. "All right, wonderful, we'll eat supper together."

He smiled bitterly. "This time," he thought, at once pleased and annoyed, "don't be afraid, don't worry, I won't reject you."

An opaque disgust oppressed him. His thoughts were no more than an arid desert; no faith, no hope in whose shadow he might rest and refresh himself. And the deception and abjection that filled his own soul was what he saw also in others, always. Impossible to scour from his eyes that discouraged and impure film that interposed itself between *him* and *life*. A little sincerity, he repeated to himself, grabbing again at his old, fixed idea, "a little faith, and I would have killed Leo . . . and now I'd be as clear, as limpid as a drop of water."

He felt himself suffocating and looked at Lisa; she seemed happy. "How do you *live?*" he wanted to scream at her. "*Sincerely?* With *faith?* Tell me how you manage to live!" His thoughts were confused and contradictory. "And yet," he thought, with an abrupt, desperate return to reality, "maybe this is all just a result of my own wrecked nerves. Or maybe it's only a question of money, or time, or circumstances." But the harder he tried to reduce and simplify his problem, the more difficult and frightening it appeared. "It's impossible to go on like this," he thought, and felt like weeping. The forest of life surrounded him, closed in on him from every direction, intricate and blind; no light shone in the distance. "Impossible."

His mother returned with her daughter in tow, dressed up like a Pierrot. Carla's face was concealed by a half-mask of black satin, and she wore an enormous, floppy collar around her neck and a

vest, pants, and slippers of white silk with big black buttons. She walked on the tips of her toes, her tricorn slanted slightly, and smiled mysteriously.

"How do we look?" asked her mother.

"Wonderful . . . wonderful," answered Lisa. "Have fun."

"That's *exactly* what we're going to do," said the girl, bursting out into laughter. Dressed up in her costume she felt as though she were someone else, someone gayer and lighter. She walked up to her brother and tapped him on the shoulder with her fan. "And you . . . well . . . we'll talk tomorrow," she said in a low voice. His confession in the cab had left her with a painful impression; she felt that Michele was ruining his life. "And instead everything is so simple," she had thought, slipping on Pierrot's trousers in front of the mirror. "And the proof of it is that despite all that's happened, I'm putting on a costume and going to the dance." She wanted to shout at Michele, "Everything is so *simple!*" Already she was thinking about how to find him some work, a job, anything Leo could come up with, as soon as they were married. But her mother was pulling at her.

"Let's go," she was saying, "let's go! The Berardis are waiting."

They descended the stairs side by side, the white Pierrot and the black Spanish lady. Mariagrazia stopped her daughter on the landing.

"Remember," she murmured into the girl's ear, "to be . . . how shall I put it? courteous to Pippo. I've given it some more thought . . . it could be that he loves you . . . and he's a good match."

"Don't worry," said Carla seriously.

They descended the second flight. By now the mother was smiling in satisfaction, thinking of how her lover, too, would be there, at the dance. She looked forward to an evening of pleasure.